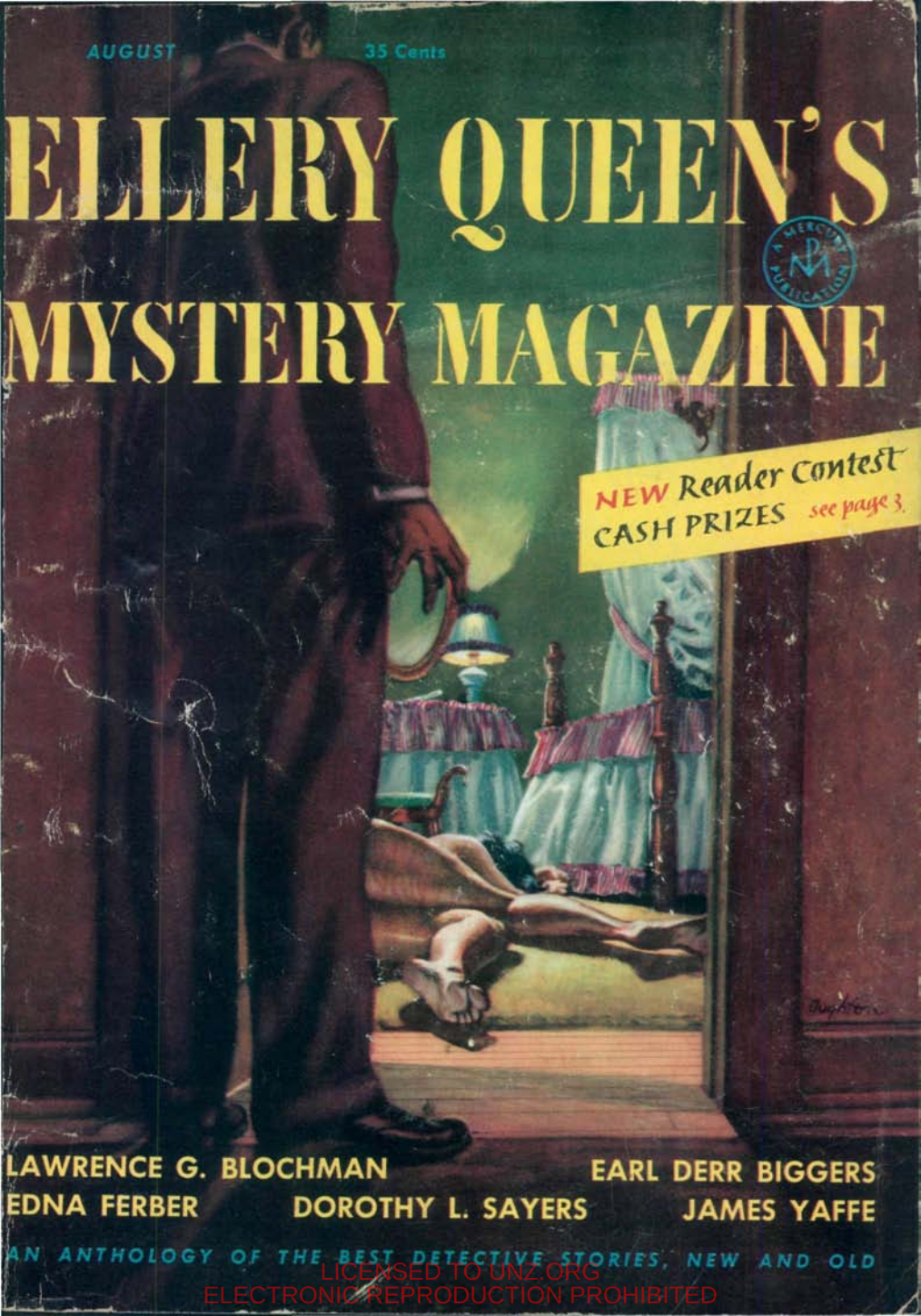

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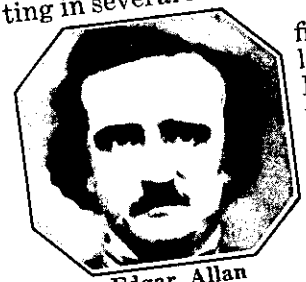
SUNDAY NEWS
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER®
February 8, 1953

SOME LITERARY HERESY, FOLKS

We feel an urge at the moment to fire up the tempers of numerous literary double-domes and intellectual book reviewers by putting in several kind words for the modern murder story, or whodunit.



Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49)

It's a relatively new form of fiction. The first detective or mystery stories read by large numbers of people were produced by Edgar Allan Poe, who died a little over 100 years ago.

Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle advanced the art a long way in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Nowadays, as we started out to say, the mystery yarn is as plentiful as the newsstands where it is mostly sold, and an important item in the book publishing business.

In our opinion, that isn't all it is, by a long shot. We think some of the best writing today is being done by mystery writers.

Further, these people's books have real meat in them — action, suspense, humor frequently, brilliant character portrayal, weird and wonderful settings and scenery. They stir your imagination, and satisfy the age-old human appetite for a good story.

Hence, we think the mystery novel is as worthy of critics' serious attention as any other kind of novel.

We're growing damned tired of the patronizing treatment it gets from most book reviewers; and we hereby move that these gents and ladies treat it as respectfully from now on as they do the books of "serious" novelists.

It's a very serious job to write a good murder story, as anyone who ever tried is well aware. If you succeed, you've produced something that contributes to the sum total of human happiness, without lugging in any messages or social significance or propaganda. That's a real achievement.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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PUBLISHER: *Lawrence E. Spivak* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 22, No. 117, AUG. 1953. Published monthly by Mercury Publications, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 570 Lexington Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879.

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IT'S SMART TO READ MYSTERIES
IT'S ALSO GOOD FOR YOUR PEACE OF MIND

**From TIME, July 7, 1952.*

TO A BOOK PUBLISHER:

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NEW CONTEST FOR EQMM READERS

1st Prize: $100

2nd Prize: $25

15 more prizes: $5 each

Here's the "gimmick" — and it's a beauty! Some time ago, just after he had been appointed Fiction Editor of Collier's, Knox Burger conceived a really bright idea for a readers' game. Mr. Burger had noticed that whenever a story appeared in Collier's which contained an unintentional error, the readers flocked to call the "boner" to the editors' attention. Perhaps "flocked" is too mild a word: the number of error-catchers was usually legion. So it occurred to Mr. Burger: why not ask a writer to do a story in which he deliberately included a whole bunch of errors, and then challenge readers to spot all the errors?

Lawrence G. Blochman, creator of the Dr. Coffee series in Collier's, was selected for the experiment. But before the story could be scheduled, Mr. Burger switched from magazine publishing to book publishing, and his "mistakes-in-a-mystery" idea was abandoned. The story Mr. Blochman had written finally appeared, but it was printed "straight," so to speak — with all the deliberate errors omitted.

Well, it's an ill wind that has no silver lining: the loss to Collier's readers proved to be a gain for EQMM readers. For Mr. Blochman has agreed to let us reprint his story — and include all the errors he originally inserted in the text! And since the entire idea (with a deep bow to Knox Burger) is an absolute "natural" for a readers' contest, we now challenge you —for cash prizes! — to find the twenty errors that Mr. Blochman, with malice aforethought, has put into "The Girl With the Burgundy Lips." (Tip-off: Only half the errors are of a criminological nature; the other ten range farther afield — all the way from potations to quotations, from the colors to the classics.)

So, to the reader of EQMM who correctly lists and most clearly explains all twenty errors, we shall award a First Prize of $100; should more than one reader list all twenty errors, the First Prize of $100 will be given to that entry which, in the opinion of the judges (the editorial staff of EQMM), is written in the simplest and clearest style. The opinion of

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the judges will be considered final and the same method of judgment will be applied to the winning of the other prizes — Second Prize of $25, and fifteen additional prizes of $5 each. (If the author happened to be guilty of any unintentional errors, these will not count!)

This contest is open to all readers of EQMM except Mr. Blochman and members of his family, and employees of Mercury Publications, Inc. and their families.

All entries must be postmarked no later than August 10, 1953. The complete list of prizewinners and the author's own list of his twenty errors will appear in the November issue of EQMM.

Hop to it, fans! Read the story for its own sake — sheer earthy entertainment — and if you notice any errors, make yourself a little list. Send the list to the Editorial Offices of EQMM, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, New York, and we promise (paraphrasing some immortal words from Gilbert and Sullivan) that it "never will be missed" by our eagle-eyed judges!

THE GIRL WITH THE BURGUNDY LIPS

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

Telegram

MARSHALL T. CUSTER
VILLA MISLAID HORIZON
HOLLYWOOD CALIF

YOUR FICTIONAL DETECTIVES ARE ALWAYS SMARTER THAN POLICE DICKS AND YOUR BEST SELLER QUOTE THE MYSTERY OF THE MADCAP MODEL UNQUOTE BEARS STRANGE RESEMBLANCE TO MURDER OF OLIVIA BRENN CURRENTLY BAFFLING NEW YORK COPS STOP AS OLIVIA WAS SAN FRANCISCO GIRL WEST COAST PAPERS DEMANDING COMPLETEST COVERAGE STOP WILL YOU FLY EAST AND SOLVE MURDER FOR THOUSAND PER WEEK PLUS EXPENSES MAXIMUM FOUR WEEKS QUERY CARP

Telegram

BENJAMIN CARP
MANAGING EDITOR
FAR WEST NEWSPAPER ALLIANCE
SAN FRANCISCO CALIF

YOU HAVE BOUGHT SOLUTION OLIVIA BRENN MURDER BUT FOUR WEEKS

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NEEDLESS AND EXTRAVAGANT STOP SUGGEST ONE WEEK PLUS TWO THOUSAND BONUS UPON CRACKING MYSTERY STOP FLYING EAST TONIGHT SEND CHECK CARE MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA 228 WEST 24TH ST NEW YORK

MARSHALL T. CUSTER

New York, May 15, 1949

Mr. Ben Carp, Mng. Ed.,
Far West Newspaper Alliance,
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear Carp:

Filed my first story Night Press Rate Collect last night and must apologize for slight delay. But it took that half-wit lawyer so long to get me out of jail that I thought he'd carried the case to the Supreme Court in Washington. Naturally I did not wire all details but am air-mailing same so you can send $500 to Joseph Kittle, attorney-at-law, as his retainer.

First, let me veto the New York cops' theory that Olivia Brenn was murdered by Ruby Loring, her roommate. True, Ruby disappeared and has not been seen since Olivia's body was discovered, but I don't see her as the killer. I'll begin at the beginning.

Olivia Brenn had been living for six months in a little two-room apartment at 23 Musetta Lane, which is an alley in Greenwich Village just south of Washington Square. As all the world knows by now, Olivia was an artist's model. She was small, slim, and shapely, if you like your shapes trim and close-reefed. She wore her sleek dark hair boyishly short. She posed in the nude. About two months ago when the posing season was slack and the pickings slimmer than a nine-day diet, she took in Ruby to share the rent. Ruby modeled, too, but not in the nude. She was about the same size as Olivia, except she had more chest expansion. She also had long blonde hair. And whereas Olivia wore severe suits and blouses, Ruby went in for girly-girly fluffs and flounces. She was fine for modeling big picture hats and full sleeves and filmy furbelows.

Well, the cops think Ruby and Olivia got along like a couple of alley cats eyeing the same fish-head. Nobody ever saw them together. Apparently they never went places together — specifically not to the studio of an artist named Henry Pollett on Washington Square South, although they both posed for Pollett. Ruby posed for magazine covers, which he painted for his ham and eggs, and Olivia posed for the arty art which he painted for fame and posterity. The cops have been making faces at Pollett, hoping he'd admit that the two gals were fighting over his lily-white body; but he says no, his interest in Ruby and Olivia was purely artistic, his sentimental nature being completely absorbed by a tomato named Jeanne Woods.

Of course it wouldn't occur to a cop that maybe Jeanne was jealous of the way Olivia posed in the nude, and expressed her jealousy through homicide. Or that the blonde Ruby had

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maybe been doing a little extracurricular posing with Pollett herself and did a quick fadeout when she found what happened to Olivia. I don't say I've adopted this theory myself, but I put it down here just for the record.

When I got to New York yesterday, I washed the stratosphere out of my ears and sauntered over to the scene of the crime. I walked up the rickety stairway to the third floor of 23 Musetta Lane. The door to the late Olivia's apartment wasn't locked, so I went in. A meek-looking little guy with his hat on was sitting on the edge of a studio couch, reading a book which I recognized immediately as *The Mystery of the Madcap Model*. I congratulated him on his taste.

"Who the hell are you?" this guy wanted to know.

"I'm the author of that book you're reading," I said, "and I'll be glad to autograph it for you."

"Not for me, you won't," the little guy said. "I don't go for this tripe. This happens to belong to the former tenant of this apartment and I —"

"I know, don't prompt me," I said. "You were struck by the similarity with the Olivia Brenn murder and you were looking through the book for possible clues."

"I got all the clues I need," said the little guy. Then he introduced himself: Kenneth Kilkenny, detective first grade, Homicide Squad. He looked more like a shipping clerk than a police dick. New York's finest must be pretty hard up for detectives if they have to take guys who just make the minimum height by a sixteenth of an inch.

"Don't be so dogmatic," I told Kilkenny. "Let's not approach this case from the orthodox police point of view. Are you positive, for instance, that Olivia Brenn was strangled?"

Kilkenny just grunted. He was deep in the book again. I could see he was gripped by it. I went on:

"I mean some poisons simulate the symptoms of strangulation. You know — purple face. The neurotoxins. Take arsenic, for instance."

"You take arsenic," Kilkenny said, still not looking at me.

"What does the Coroner say about the possibility of poison? There was a Coroner's inquest, wasn't there?" I said.

"Look," Kilkenny said. "Why don't you go write another book? You're not invited to this murder."

"Sure I am. The Far West Newspaper Alliance invited me at great expense." I opened a closet door. I saw a couple of suits that must have belonged to Olivia, and five or six fluffy dresses that would have been Ruby Loring's. There were Cuban heels and tight little felt cloches to match the suits, and high French heels and floppy hats to go with the dresses. Kilkenny finally looked up.

"You do look a little like a storybook sleuth with that canary shirt and emerald-green tie," he said, "but your pearl-gray featherweight felt hat should be pulled down a little more over one eye. And where's your beautiful blonde secretary? I thought

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you guys never went out on a case except with a starry-eyed dame who falls down man-holes or gets waylaid by thugs so you can rescue her."

"My blonde amanuensis ran away to be a bareback rider in the circus," I told him. "I now rely exclusively on my faithful hip flask and my padded gray cells."

"Go find yourself a big desk to put your feet on, so you can think hard and analyze clues," Kilkenny said. "You can't stay here."

"Sure I can," I popped back. "You can't throttle the freedom of the press, Kilkenny. I stand on my constitutional rights under the Sixth Amendment."

Kilkenny closed the book and a book-mark fell out. It was a sales check from Backdorf's Fifth Avenue. I could read *Hand-embroidered silk slip, $35*, but I pretended I didn't see it. I went over to the dressing table and looked at the cosmetics. There was Burgundy lipstick, sun-tan powder, and dark rouge for Olivia. The tangerine lipstick and light-colored powder must have been Ruby's. I strolled into the bathroom.

"You'd look more authentic if you had a black eye, a few teeth knocked out, and one arm in a sling," Kilkenny said. "Why don't you go find yourself a drunken brawl, so I'll know for sure you're a shamus?"

"I'm not a brawler, Kilkenny. I'm the cerebral type. I collect orchids and rare jade. And I like it fine right here."

"I'm warning you, Custer," Kilkenny said. "If you don't scram I'll have to jug you for obstructing justice."

"I'm not obstructing anything," I said. "I'm merely giving you the benefit of my trained deductive brain. For instance, while the evidence shows Ruby left this apartment in a hurry, it also indicates she did not expect to go far or stay away long: she left her dresses behind in the closet. She did expect to be gone overnight, however. Did you notice she took her toothbrush with her? There's only one toothbrush in the bathroom and only one brush and comb on the dresser. Did you notice?"

"I do my own noticing," Kilkenny said, very tough. "Get out."

He had come up behind me and somehow I got the idea he was going to sock me. Turning abruptly, I put up my arm to guard my chin, and I knocked his hat off. He was as bald as a chinchilla. I laughed. I don't know why the idea of a bald-headed detective should strike me so funny, but it always does. I couldn't stop laughing — until Kilkenny snapped the handcuffs on my wrists.

"Since you know so much about this case," he said, "I'm going to hold you as a material witness."

Well, you can score an error against me for not guessing that Kilkenny had no sense of humor. Anyhow, I was in the clink for three hours before I could get hold of this lawyer Kittle, and it took him another six hours to get me out on a writ of replevin.

And now I must get to work and

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dig up the murderer of Olivia Brenn for you. Keep clean, Carp.

Yours in crime,
MARSHALL T. CUSTER

New York, May 16, 1949

Dear Carp:

I just filed my second story on the Brenn case, and as you can see, I am making progress. I am deliberately keeping away from this artist Henry Pollett and his brush-moll Jeanne Woods, because the cops have all got cracked voices from baying up that tree, so it must be the wrong tree.

Today I went back to 23 Musetta Lane, which is a very old building, obviously erected before the invention of fresh air. It is three stories high and half a story wide and is wedged in between the corner delicatessen and a modern apartment house. It would probably have been torn down a century ago, only there isn't room to build anything on the site except maybe an elevator shaft. Besides, it's historic. Two famous poets and a famous etcher starved to death on the premises. The modern tenants are also slightly tainted with Art, not only the two models who occupied the third-floor cells — the late Olivia Brenn and the missing Ruby Loring — but also Pierre Duval, who lives just under the scene of the murder. Duval is an unemployed wine-taster who is also a part-time painter. Every Sunday he goes to Washington Square and paints the arch at the end of Fifth Avenue.

The apartment under Duval, the ground-floor mole run, is the home of a sausage-and-pickle juggler named Franz Ziegler who operates the delicatessen next door. Ziegler took over the shop five years ago and ran it with his wife until she died last year. He now carries on with a one-eyed, lame-brained pumpernickel slicer and puts in a fourteen-hour day among his beloved cheeses and salamis.

I already spotted this delicatessen yesterday, and while I was languishing in the pokey, I figured it would be just the place to go for odd bits of information about Olivia and Ruby. There are two reasons: (1) when a widower of one year and still in the prime of life starts thinking about the opposite sex in a tender way, his attention is going to be focused pretty close to home if he spends fourteen hours a day behind the counter; and (2), two chicks who get their feed money from such a whimsical trade as modeling are apt to be on good terms with a guy who could stake them to a pastrami sandwich when the posing wasn't paying off.

When I dropped in on Ziegler, he was smacking his lips and unpacking a shipment of imported Pilsner beer and Limburger cheese, just arrived from Germany. He was pushing 40, but there wasn't a gray hair in his sandy crew-cut. He had a round face with two deep dimples and blue eyes. He had the ruddy complexion of a morphine addict.

"I understand Olivia Brenn ran up quite an unpaid bill with you,"

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I said, taking out my wallet. "If you'll tell me the total —"

"Miss Brenn never came near this place," Ziegler said. "I guess it wasn't good enough for her. She never spoke to me."

"What about Ruby Loring?" I asked.

His face changed and I knew I'd hit pay-dirt. He growled:

"I got nothing more to say. I told the police everything."

I explained that I was a writer, not a cop, and that I didn't share the police theory that Ruby had killed Olivia. I said: "You haven't heard from Ruby since the murder, have *you?*"

He said he hadn't. He had no idea where she might be.

"What about her parents?" I asked.

Ziegler said both her parents were dead and she had no family left. He looked at me strangely as he said this. I thought I saw tears in his eyes, so I said: "You were pretty sweet on Ruby, weren't you?"

"I was crazy about her," he said. "I still am. We're going to be married as soon as her divorce is final."

I asked him where her ex-husband was. He didn't know. Ruby hadn't heard from him in ages.

"So you've been taking care of her?" I asked.

"Not really. She worked, you know. A model. But when things were tough she used to come in here to eat."

"And you gave her little presents now and then?" I remembered the sales check. "Maybe a silk slip from Backdorf's Fifth Avenue — like that?"

"Oh, that," Ziegler said. "Yes, I gave her little presents once in a while. Don't get the wrong idea, though. There was nothing between us. She was very strict about that. Nothing until her divorce was final and we could get married."

Then he told me about the last time he saw her. The cops have given none of this out yet, so the story I wired today is a scoop for Far West.

On the evening of the murder, Ziegler and Ruby had dinner together — a small roast squab, some cucumber salad, Gruyère cheese and beer, and fresh raspberry tarts. They ate in the third-floor apartment because Olivia was out. And Ziegler had a little present for Ruby — the new silk slip from Backdorf's Fifth Avenue.

"She was crazy about the slip," Ziegler said. "It was hand-made, with little red lip prints embroidered here and there on the front. She had to try it on right away."

"Was Ruby in the habit of undressing in front of you?"

"Say, she's a model, ain't she?"

"I understand she never poses in the nude."

"You wouldn't call putting on a slip posing in the nude," Ziegler protested. "She just went in the other room to put it on and then she came out to show me how it looked."

"Didn't she kiss you to thank you?"

"Don't go getting wrong ideas," Ziegler said.

After dinner Ruby went out to

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meet some advertising man who had promised her a photographic job for some dress account. She told Ziegler she'd stop by for a glass of beer when she came home, but she never did. He hasn't seen her since, he says.

It was a rainy night and business was slow, so Ziegler closed his delicatessen shortly after 11. He went to his apartment, took off his shoes, and settled down with a book to wait for Ruby. He didn't read much, because of the infernal racket in the apartment just above — the apartment of Pierre Duval, the unemployed wine-taster. The noise was loud and bacchanalian — shrieks of female laughter, a strong alcoholic baritone, thumping on the floor by both people and furniture, and the occasional crash of glass.

By midnight Ziegler had absorbed more decibels than he could stand. He climbed one flight and banged on Duval's door. No response. Duval continued singing some ribald chantey with a shrill obbligato of woman's laughter. Ziegler tried the door. It was unlocked, so he opened it.

The place was a shambles. Duval had been having himself a wine-taster's holiday. There were several empty bottles on the floor, and a half-empty gallon jug of red wine on the table. There was a pair of woman's shoes on the mantelpiece, a woman's blouse draped over the floor lamp, and a skirt hanging from Duval's Sunday easel. Duval was sprawled in an armchair with his hair in his eyes, wine stains on his shirt, and Olivia Brenn on his lap. Olivia was half undressed.

"They offered me wine," Ziegler said, "but I was so mad I just swore at them. I told them if they didn't stop their racket, I was going to call the police."

The party calmed down immediately. Ziegler went back to his book and fell asleep in his chair. He awoke with a start a little before one. He thought Ruby may have come by while he dozed and that he hadn't heard her knock.

He went up to the third floor to see if she was home. The apartment door was ajar, he says, and the light was on, so he looked inside. Ruby wasn't there, but Olivia Brenn was.

Olivia was lying on the floor, stark naked. At first Ziegler thought she was just dead drunk, but a second look told him she was dead, period. Her face was blue and her eyes were bulging.

Ziegler rushed back to his own place to call the police, and that was the end of the story as far as he was concerned.

I haven't got Duval's version yet, as apparently he's unemployed no longer. I'll catch him tonight.

Button up well, Carp.

Yours in crime,

MARSHALL T. CUSTER

New York, May 17, 1949

Dear Carp:

Was that story I filed last night full of heart interest? It should have been, because as Shakespeare said, "Bronze

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is the mirror of the form; wine of the heart." And I tell you confidentially, Carp, that following my talk with Pierre Duval last night I was full of both wine and Shakespeare. Duval is a generous man with both potation and quotation.

I intercepted Duval coming into Musetta Lane with his arms full of bottles. He is a tall, dark guy with droopy eyes, droopy nose, and droopy mustache. To those who like mustaches, he is probably handsome. When I said I understood he was a wine-taster, he corrected me: "I am an oenologist, sir. An oenologist."

He confirmed that he was no longer an unemployed oenologist. He has been retained by a big keg-to-bottle firm that owns a shipload of barreled Algerian wine and a dozen tank cars of California red ink. The firm wants to blend, carbonate, and bottle the stuff to be sold to the Great American public as Sparkling Burgundy. Duval is testing the wines for acidity, specific gravity, etc., to determine which blend will best hold the bubbles of carbon disulphide for synthetic sparkle.

Duval was carrying several bottles of home work, as well as a few little vintage items from France which he had noticed around the shop and on which somebody might want his expert opinion. One of these was a bottle of Château Margaux which was opened simultaneously with our interview. You will be delighted to hear, Carp, that it was the best Burgundy I have ever tasted.

Well, as we sat there surrounding the Château Margaux and surrounded by Duval's paintings of the Washington Square arch on Sunday, I asked about the orgy on the night of the murder.

"Orgy, my eye!" Duval said. "We were just having a little wine for thy stomach's sake. I was celebrating my new job, and Olivia just dropped in to sample the raw materials I was working with."

"Do people usually disrobe when they sample the raw materials of your trade?" I asked.

"Olivia didn't really disrobe," Duval said. "She spilled some wine on her blouse and skirt, and you know how red wine stains if you don't get it out right away. She took off her things to wash out the spots and hung them to dry while we went on sampling. She wasn't undressed, actually. She had her slip on."

"Ziegler says she was sitting in your lap," I reminded Duval. "Was she in love with you or vice versa."

"We were very good friends," Duval said.

Duval said Olivia left him about half-past midnight and he fell asleep immediately. He was awakened a little after 1 by Ziegler running down the stairs, yelling for the police.

Duval said he knew Pollett, the artist. He didn't know if Pollett had been making passes at Olivia beyond the call of artistic duty. He thought not. But Jeanne Woods, Pollett's brush-moll, could have been jealous of the model anyhow — maybe murderously jealous. And Duval quoted

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some more Shakespeare at me: "Love is strong as death; jealousy as cruel as the grave."

As for the missing Ruby Loring, Duval said he scarcely knew her. She wasn't his type. She drank beer.

"I don't think Ruby strangled Olivia," he said. "It was a man's job. The finger marks were still on the poor gal's throat when I saw her — big fingers. Ruby was a small girl, like Olivia."

Duval was just pulling the cork out of a fat, pot-bellied bottle of French Rhine wine when there was a knock on the door. It was Detective Kenneth Kilkenny, Homicide Squad.

"Hello, Kilkenny," I said. "I was down at Centre Street today to have a look at the Homicide Squad in its native habitat. I didn't see you anywhere around."

"I was at the morgue," Kilkenny said. "How come we don't see you at the morgue, Custer?"

"The Custer method involves the study of live characters, not dead ones," I told him. "Incidentally, Duval says there were finger marks on Olivia's throat, so you must have developed some fingerprints. You wouldn't hold out on me, would you?"

"You mentioned poison the other night," Kilkenny said, ignoring my question. "Do you know the autopsy showed small subcutaneous hemorrhages in Olivia's scalp?"

"See? That rules out strangulation," I said. "Blunt instrument, probably. What else did the autopsy show?"

"The Medical Examiner's not finished yet."

"Not yet? After almost a week? Where I come from we finish an autopsy in an hour."

"I'll bet," Kilkenny said. "We take a month, sometimes. By the way, I turned Pollett and his girl friend loose today."

"Well, well. Exonerated?"

"Not exactly. But he's having a one-man show in his studio tomorrow. Invitations went out three weeks ago, so we'll let the show go on. Too bad you're not invited, Custer. You could sleuth your head off among all the free liquor and free-wheeling Village dames."

"I'll be there," I said. "Early."

"How about a beaker of dragon's blood, Minion of the Law?" Duval poured a glass of wine.

"Not while I'm working," Kilkenny said. "Well, good night, all you lovely people. See you in jail."

After Kilkenny left, Duval and I had a few more whiffs of the grape. Just as Duval seemed about to burst into song, I asked him if he had a key to Olivia's apartment. He said no, but the *no* was partially concealed by a slight eructation, so I said: "In these old houses, I'll bet any key will open all the doors. Let's try."

We tried, and—surprise, surprise! Duval's key did open the late Olivia's door. Duval wouldn't come inside the apartment with me, though. He said he'd wait outside to warn me in case Kilkenny should start gumshoeing up the stairs while I was there.

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I just took a quick look around the bathroom. The lone toothbrush was still in the glass over the washstand. I looked at the lipstick smear on the bristles, trying to decide if it was a purple-red or an orange-red. Then I took the brush, popped it into an envelope, and slipped it into my pocket.

I had one more stirrup cup with Duval, then sank my spurs into Shanks' Mare and galloped home.

Good night to you, dear Carp, and don't forget to take your vitamins.

Yours in crime,

MARSHALL T. CUSTER

New York, May 18, 1949

Dear Carp:

Better get that $2000 bonus check ready and certified, because I'll be home to pick it up any day now. The Olivia Brenn case is in the bag for me, but Kilkenny threatens to lock me up again if we print the latest developments before he gives the word, so please consider these details of Pollett's studio party as top secret until I flash you.

The *vernissage*, as we artists call it, was scheduled for 5 in the afternoon. There was a preview for the press at 4:30, on account of the news value of the pictures modeled by the murdered Olivia and the missing Ruby. So I dropped in at 4 sharp to cast an eye over Pollett and his jealous tomato.

Kilkenny was there first, of course — with his hat on. Franz Ziegler was also there, stacking sandwiches.

Ziegler had unveiled his smörgåsbord, stowed his several reams of waxed paper and other debris in the kitchenette, and departed while I was making friends with Pollett. I didn't even try to get through Jeanne Woods' painted war mask and supplementary hostile grimaces. For my money, her Nile-green hostess pajamas could have been made of cast-iron.

Pollett was wearing his artist's uniform of midnight-blue corduroy and Windsor tie. He followed me around while I looked at his canvases. They had a decided blue tone, like Picasso in his Blue Period. Lots of burnt umber and madder.

The Brenn nudes were painted with bold, coarse strokes, obviously with the flat of a dry, broad brush. The Ruby Loring magazine covers were done with a fine, glossy finish, every polished hair in place. But despite the difference in style, the features of the two girls looked pretty much alike — the work of an artist who has struck a vein some art editor likes.

"Free yourself from commercial art, Pollett," I said. "You have talent, but you're in a rut. Everything you paint looks like a cover girl."

"I'll make the break some day," Pollett said.

"You're not getting any younger," I said. "Tempera fugits."

That was a pun, Carp. Tempera is a kind of paint made with a base of shrimp paste. Remember those fried tempera shrimps in that Japanese restaurant on East Fifth Street, L. A.?

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About this time the so-called working press began to arrive and the flash bulbs and whiskey corks were popping all over the place. One corner of my jaundiced eye caught Kilkenny sneaking off to the kitchenette. I followed.

The kitchenette was little bigger than a phone booth. It looked as if the girl friend didn't do much home cooking for Pollett. The pots and pans had an inch of dust on them. So did the little gas range. Kilkenny opened the door of the oven and I noticed that the roaster inside didn't seem dusty at all. I guess Kilkenny noticed it too, because he lifted the cover off the roaster and took out a tightly wadded bundle of silk.

When he unwadded the silk, a strand of coarse blonde hair fell out. The silk was a lady's slip with little red lips embroidered on the front of it. On the back was a deep red stain as big as a man's hand.

"Looks like blood, Kilkenny," I said. "Let's rush it over to my room. I've got the chemicals to make a quick benzene test."

"You!" Kilkenny snorted. "If you print one word of this before the murderer is under lock and key, I'll toss you right back in the clink. Go out there and mingle with the guests."

I went out and mingled. I watched artists talking about the pictures with their thumbs. I saw Pierre Duval come in and shovel up at least 3000 calories. I saw Kilkenny go out with his evidence in a brown paper bag. Then I sneaked out myself — to write this letter and clean up a few little odds and ends. I am now going back to Pollett's studio.

I expect to file my final story tonight. With the difference in time, it should catch the late afternoon editions.

Say your prayers regularly, Carp, and brush your teeth twice a day.

Yours in crime,

MARSHALL T. CUSTER

New York, May 19, 1949

Dear Carp:

Received your wire of congratulations, but noted no telegraphic money-order attached. Thanks anyhow.

Well, here's how it all happened. About 10 last night Duval and I were sitting among the Duval collection of Washington Square arches on Sunday, testing various methods of dimming the glow we had contracted at Pollett's studio party. We had just about decided on a bottle of Rainwater Madeira that Duval had found in some old cellar, when Kilkenny came barging in like six atoms in search of a chain reaction.

Kilkenny waved a yellow teletype message under my nose and yelled: "Damn you, Custer, you go right back to jail. Listen to this: 'San Francisco Gazette headlines — Gazette Reporter Cracks N. Y. Mystery. Writer Captures Model's Killer Single-handed.' I told you —"

"You told me not to break the story until the murderer was under lock and key. Well, he is. Right here."

"Nuts. Duval's not the guy."

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"Stop being so mysterious, Kilkenny," I said. "Everybody knows by now that Franz Ziegler killed Olivia. Modulate your voice."

Kilkenny didn't modulate anything. He kept yelling I'd tipped off Ziegler by breaking confidence, and how Ziegler disappeared from his delicatessen three hours ago.

"I've had these buildings surrounded for two days," he shouted. "I don't know how he got through. But I got 300 men combing the city for him."

"They're combing the wrong places," I said. "Ziegler didn't leave the building. He is now locked in Mr. Duval's genuine antique pre-Revolutionary bathroom. Have a look?"

While Duval was unlocking the bathroom, I told Kilkenny how we slipped Ziegler a mickey. I got Ziegler to come upstairs to taste some genuine Hochheimer and to identify some dime-store earrings I said I thought might be Ruby's. I put a few drops of chlorophyll in his wine, and when he passed out, we deposited him in the bathtub.

When we opened the door, Ziegler was still reclining peacefully in the tub, a little damp behind the ears and above the eyes because the shower leaked a little and was dripping on his head. Kilkenny put the cuffs on Ziegler and jumped for the telephone.

"You can tell your side-kicks, Kilkenny," I said, "that they can stop looking for Ruby Loring. Ruby and Olivia were the same person."

"All right, Sherlock Holmes," Kilkenny said when he had hung up. "Tell me how you discovered the masquerade."

I told him it was easy, once I had a good look at the toothbrush. It had traces of two lipsticks on it — burgundy and tangerine.

"Even in the improbable event that both girls used the same brush," I said, "we must remember that few women brush their teeth while wearing make-up. One exception, yes. But two, living together and using the same toothbrush, is beyond the realm of plausibility. Therefore, Olivia and Ruby were one. The fact that they were never seen together bears this out. So does the striking resemblance of their features in Pollett's paintings.

"I assume that Olivia created the character of Ruby in order to get more work — double work with Pollett, for instance. The anatomical differential, both hair and build, was obviously synthetic, as borne out by the fact that Ruby never posed in the nude. Later Olivia put her dual role to other uses. As the blonde Ruby she was practically living off Ziegler, although she played coy and held him off at arm's length. At the same time she was having fun and games — as Olivia — with Duval.

"After she dined with Ziegler on the night of the murder, the synthetic Ruby took off her blonde wig and falsies and went down to drink with Duval, as Olivia. But she apparently did not take off the new silk slip which Ziegler had given her. So when Ziegler stormed into Duval's at

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midnight, he must have recognized Ruby's slip on Olivia, and realized the truth. He then obviously went upstairs, confronted Olivia with the facts, and killed her in a jealous rage. He took away the slip, the wig, and the falsies to prolong the legend of the two separate individuals, and to cast suspicion on the mythical Ruby. By the way, Kilkenny, why don't you look for the wig and falsies?"

"We found 'em the day after the murder," Kilkenny said, "in an ash can in Washington Square."

"Very clever," I said. "So you went on talking about Ruby to give the killer a sense of false security. And by keeping the heat on Pollett and his tomato, you trapped Ziegler into planting the silk slip in Pollett's oven when he delivered the sandwiches today. Am I right, Kilkenny? What do you think of the Custer method now?"

Kilkenny admitted it was okay for fiction, but that my deductions weren't backed by proof that would stand up in court. The police, he said, had scientific basis for the same conclusions. For instance, an analysis of stomach contents during the autopsy showed traces of wine — which Olivia drank — and also cucumber and raspberry seeds, which matched the menu Ziegler said he fed to Ruby. Therefore Ruby was Olivia. And the clincher was the red stain on the slip which turned up at Pollett's: the M.E.'s chemist said it was wine.

"I am just dying of curiosity," Kilkenny said, "to know how the Custer method put the finger on Ziegler."

"Why it just stands to reason," I said. "Pure logic and deduction. Given the set of circumstances and character relationships, it just couldn't be anybody else."

"Sure, for a book," Kilkenny said. "But for a jury, you got to have evidence. If I could get a conviction on pure logic and deduction, I would have grabbed Ziegler six days ago. But I had to wait until he furnished me with proof, which he did this afternoon. He left a beautiful set of fingerprints on Henry Pollett's roaster, and on the silk slip. I guess he didn't know we can develop prints off cloth with nitrates and iodine vapor."

So you see, Carp, how unimaginative and uninspired police methods are.

"Furthermore," Kilkenny went on, "since this Ziegler seems to have a jealous and murderous nature, we're going to exhume the late Mrs. Ziegler tomorrow. We may find poison."

"Speaking of poison," Duval interrupted, "how about a drop of this excellent Rainwater, Minion of the Law?"

"Rainwater hell," said Kilkenny. "I've finished the job. Pour me a glass of wine."

I'm seeing Joseph Kittle today, and if the learned counsellor has got his fee from you and can clear me with the law, I'll see you tomorrow.

Keep your fountain pen filled, Carp, and your check book handy.

Yours in crime,

MARSHALL T. CUSTER

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Surely it is pointless to tell you any details of the life and work of Edna Ferber, who is one of the best-known writers in America today. Her best-selling novels are familiar to all book-lovers — SO BIG (*which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1925*), SHOW BOAT (*whose fabulous career as a novel, play, motion picture, and radio story has become a literary landmark in the history of modern American fiction*), CIMARRON, SARATOGA TRUNK, *and most recently that titanic best-seller,* GIANT. *Nor are her plays, written in collaboration with George S. Kaufman, less famous — "Dinner at Eight," "The Royal Family," "Stage Door," to recall some of their magic titles.*

Instead of becoming more detailed, we would rather quote from Edna Ferber's Foreword to the book in which she included her only short story of crime and detection, "The Man Who Came Back." We think you will agree that Miss Ferber's remarks are both interesting and provocative.

" 'And so,' *the story writers used to say,* 'they lived happily ever after.'

"*Um-m-m — maybe. After the glamour had worn off, and the glass slippers worn out, did the Prince never find Cinderella's manner redolent of the kitchen hearth; and was it never necessary that he remind her to be more careful of her finger-nails and grammar? . . .*

"*It is a great risk to take with one's book-children. These stories make no such promises. They stop just short of the phrase of the old story writers, and end truthfully, thus:*

"And so they lived."

No, "The Man Who Came Back" makes no such promise. It promises only the Ferber "touch," the Ferber sheer readability . . .

THE MAN WHO CAME BACK

by EDNA FERBER

THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF DOING battle against Disgrace. You may live it down; or you may run away from it and hide. The first method is heart-breaking, but sure. The second cannot be relied upon because of the uncomfortable way Disgrace has of turning up at your heels just when

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you think you have eluded her in the last town but one.

Ted Terrill did not choose the first method. He had it thrust upon him. After Ted had served his term he came back home to visit his mother's grave, intending to take the next train out. He wore none of the prison pallor that you read about in books, because he had been shortstop on the penitentiary all-star baseball team, and famed for the dexterity with which he could grab up red-hot grounders. The-storied lockstep and the clipped hair effect also were missing. The superintendent of Ted's prison had been one of the reform kind.

You never would have picked Ted for a criminal. He had none of those interesting phrenological bumps and depressions that usually are shown to such frank advantage in the Bertillon photographs. Ted had been assistant cashier in the Citizens' National Bank. In a mad moment he had attempted a little sleight-of-hand act in which certain Citizens' National funds were to be transformed into certain glittering shares and back again so quickly that the examiners couldn't follow it with their eyes. But Ted was unaccustomed to these now-you-see-it-and-now-you-don't feats and his hand slipped. The trick dropped to the floor with an awful clatter.

Ted had been a lovable young kid, six feet high, and blond, with a great reputation as a dresser. He had the first yellow plush hat in our town. It sat on his golden head like a halo. The women all liked Ted. Mrs. Dankworth, the dashing widow (why will widows persist in being dashing?), said that he was the only man in our town who knew how to wear a dress suit. The men were forever slapping him on the back and asking him to have a little something. Ted's good looks and his clever tongue and a certain charming Irish way he had with him caused him to be taken up by the smart set. Now, if you've never lived in a small town you will be much amused at the idea of its boasting a smart set. Which proves your ignorance. The small-town smart set is deadly serious about its smartness. It likes to take three-hour runs down to the city to fit a pair of shoes and attend the opera. Its clothes are as well-made, and its scandals as crisp, and its pace as hasty, and its golf club as dull as the clothes, and scandals, and pace, and golf club of its city cousins.

The hasty pace killed Ted. He tried to keep step in a set of young folks whose fathers had made our town. And all the time his pocketbook was yelling, "Whoa!" The young people ran largely to leather-upholstered convertibles and country-club doings and house parties, as small-town younger generations are apt to. When Ted went to high school half the boys in his little clique spent their after-school hours dashing up and down Main Street in their big, glittering cars, sitting slumped down on the middle of their spines in front of the steering wheel, their sleeves

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rolled up, their hair combed a militant crew-cut. One or the other of them always took Ted along. It is fearfully easy to develop a taste for that kind of thing. As he grew older, the taste took root and became a habit.

Ted came out after serving his term, still handsome, in spite of all that story-writers may have taught to the contrary. But we'll make this concession to the old tradition. There was a difference. His radiant blondeur was dimmed in some intangible, elusive way. Birdie Callahan, who had worked in Ted's mother's kitchen for years, and who had gone back to her old job at the Haley House after her mistress's death, put it sadly, thus:

"He was always th' han'some divil. I used to look forward to ironin' day just for the pleasure of pressin' his fancy shirts for him. I'm that partial to them swell blonds. But I dinnaw, he's changed. Doin' time has taken the edge off his hair an' complexion. Not changed his color, do yuh mind, but dulled it, like a gold ring, or the like, that has tarnished."

Ted was seated in the smoker, with a chip on his shoulder, and a sick horror of encountering someone he knew in his heart, when Joe Haley, of the Haley House, got on at Westport, homeward bound. Joe Haley is the most eligible bachelor in our town, and the slipperiest. He has made the Haley House a gem, so that traveling men will cut half a dozen towns to Sunday there. If he should say, "Jump through this!" to any girl in our town she'd jump and be very glad to do it.

Joe Haley strolled leisurely up the car aisle toward Ted. Ted saw him coming and sat very still, waiting.

"Hello, Ted! How's Ted?" said Joe Haley, casually. And dropped into the adjoining seat without any more fuss.

Ted wet his lips slightly and tried to say something. He had been a breezy talker. But the words would not come. Joe Haley made no effort to cover the situation with a rush of conversation. He did not seem to realize that there was any situation to cover. He champed the end of his cigar and handed one to Ted.

"Well, you've taken your lickin', kid. What you going to do now?"

The rawness of it made Ted wince. "Oh, I don't know," he stammered. "I've got a job half promised in Chicago."

"What doing?"

Ted laughed a short and ugly laugh. "Driving a brewery truck."

Joe Haley tossed his cigar dexterously to the opposite corner of his mouth and squinted thoughtfully along its bulging sides.

"Remember that Wenzel girl that's kept books for me for the last six years? She's leaving in a couple of months to marry a New York guy that travels for ladies' cloaks and suits. After she goes it's nix with the lady bookkeepers for me. Not that Minnie isn't a good, straight girl, and honest, but no girl can keep books with one eye on a column of figures and the other on a traveling man in a

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brown suit and a red necktie, unless she's cross-eyed, and you bet Minnie ain't. The job's yours if you want it. Eighty a month to start on, and board."

"I — can't, Joe. Thanks just the same. I'm going to try to begin all over again, somewhere else, where nobody knows me."

"Oh yes," said Joe. "I knew a fellow that did that. After he came out he grew a beard, and wore eyeglasses, and changed his name. Had a quick, crisp way of talkin', so he cultivated a drawl and went west and started in business. Real estate, I think. Anyway, the second month he was there in walks a fool he used to know and bellows: 'Why, if it ain't Bill! Hello, Bill! I thought you was doing time yet.' That was enough. Ted, you can black your face, and dye your hair, and squint, and some fine day, sooner or later, somebody'll come along and blab the whole thing. And say, the older it gets the worse it sounds when it does come out. Stick around here where you grew up, Ted."

Ted clasped and unclasped his hands uncomfortably. "I can't figure out why you should care how I finish."

"No reason," answered Joe. "Not a darned one. I wasn't ever in love with your ma, like the guy on the stage; and I never owed your pa a cent. So it ain't a guilty conscience. I guess it's just pure cussedness, and a hankerin' for a new investment. I'm curious to know how'll you turn out. You've got the makin's of what the newspapers call a Leading Citizen, even if you did fall down once. If I'd ever had time to get married, which I never will have, a first-class hotel bein' more worry and expense than a Pittsburgh steel magnate's whole harem, I'd have wanted somebody to do the same for my kid. That sounds slushy, but it's straight."

"I don't seem to know how to thank you," began Ted, a little husky as to voice.

"Call around tomorrow morning," interrupted Joe Haley, briskly, "and Minnie Wenzel will show you the ropes. You and her can work together for a couple of months. After then she's leaving to make her underwear, and that. I should think she'd have a bale of it by this time. Been embroidering them shimmy things and lunch cloths back of the desk when she thought I wasn't lookin' for the last six months."

Ted came down next morning at 8 A.M. with his nerve between his teeth and the chip still balanced lightly on his shoulder. Five minutes later Minnie Wenzel knocked it off. When Joe Haley introduced the two jocularly, knowing that they had originally met in the First Reader room, Miss Wenzel acknowledged the introduction icily by lifting her left eyebrow slightly and drawing down the corners of her mouth. Her air of hauteur was a triumph, considering that she was handicapped by black sateen sleevelets.

I wonder how one could best describe Miss Wenzel? There is one of

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her in every small town. Let me think (business of hand on brow). Well, she always paid $8 for her girdles when most girls in a similar position got theirs for $1.59 in the basement. Nature had been kind to her. The hair that had been a muddy brown in Minnie's schoolgirl days it had touched with a magic red-gold wand. Birdie Callahan always said that Minnie was working only to wear out her old clothes.

After the introduction Miss Wenzel followed Joe Haley into the lobby. She took no pains to lower her voice.

"Well, I must say, Mr. Haley, you've got a fine nerve! If my gentleman friend was to hear of my working with an ex-con I wouldn't be surprised if he'd break off the engagement. I should think you'd have some respect for the feelings of a lady with a name to keep up, and engaged to a swell fellow like Mr. Stone."

"Say, listen, m' girl," replied Joe Haley. "The law don't cover all the tricks. But if stuffing an order was a criminal offense I'll bet your swell traveling man would be doing a life term."

Ted worked that day with his teeth set so that his jaws ached next morning. Minnie Wenzel spoke to him only when necessary and then in terms of dollars and cents. When dinnertime came she divested herself of the black sateen sleevelets and disappeared in the direction of the washroom. Ted waited until the dining-room was almost deserted. Then he went in to dinner alone. Someone in white wearing an absurd little pocket handkerchief of an apron led him to a seat in a far corner of the big room. Ted did not lift his eyes higher than the snowy square of the apron. The Apron drew out a chair, shoved it under Ted's knees in the way Aprons have, and thrust a printed menu at him.

"Roast beef, medium," said Ted, without looking up.

"Bless your heart, yuh ain't changed a bit. I remember how yuh used to jaw when it was too well done," said the Apron, fondly.

Ted's head came up with a jerk.

"So yuh will cut yer old friends, is it?" grinned Birdie Callahan. "If this wasn't a public dining-room maybe yuh'd shake hands with a poor but proud workin' girrul. Yer as good-lookin' a divil as ever, Mister Ted."

Ted's hand shot out and grasped hers. "Birdie! I could weep on your apron! I never was so glad to see anyone in my life. Just to look at you makes me homesick. What in Sam Hill are you doing here?"

"Waitin'. After yer ma died, seemed like I didn't care t' work fer no other privit fam'ly, so I came back here on my old job. I'll bet I'm the homeliest head-waitress in captivity."

Ted's nervous fingers were pleating the tablecloth. His voice sank to a whisper. "Birdie, tell me the God's truth. Did those three years cause her death?"

"Niver!" lied Birdie. "I was with her to the end. It started with a cold on th' chest. Have some French fried

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with yer beef, Mr. Teddy. They're illigant today."

Birdie glided off to the kitchen. Authors are fond of the word "glide." But you can take it literally this time. Birdie had a face that looked like a huge mistake, but she walked like a panther, and they're said to be the last cry as gliders. She walked with her chin up and her hips firm. That comes from juggling trays. You have to walk like that to keep your nose out of the soup. After a while the walk becomes a habit. Any seasoned dining-room girl could give lessons in walking to the Delsarte teacher of an Eastern finishing school.

From the day that Birdie Callahan served Ted with the roast beef medium and the elegant French fried, she appointed herself monitor over his food and clothes and morals. I wish I could find words to describe his bitter loneliness. He did not seek companionship. The men, although not directly avoiding him; seemed somehow to have pressing business whenever they happened in his vicinity. The women ignored him. Mrs. Dankworth, still dashing and still widowed, passed Ted one day and looked fixedly at a point one inch above his head. In a town like ours the Haley House is like a big, hospitable clubhouse. The men drop in there the first thing in the morning, and the last thing at night, to hear the gossip and buy a cigar and jolly the girl at the cigar counter. Ted spoke to them when they spoke to him. He began to develop a certain grim line about the mouth. Joe Haley watched him from afar, and the longer he watched the kinder and more speculative grew the look in his eyes. And slowly and surely there grew in the hearts of our townspeople a certain new respect and admiration for this boy who was fighting his fight.

Ted got into the habit of taking his meals late, so that Birdie Callahan could take the time to talk to him.

"Birdie," he said one day, when she brought his soup, "do you know that you're the only decent woman who'll talk to me? Do you know what I mean when I say that I'd give the rest of my life if I could just put my head in my mother's lap and have her muss up my hair and call me foolish names?"

Birdie Callahan cleared her throat and said abruptly: "I was noticin' yesterday your gray pants needs pressin' bad. Bring 'em down tomorrow mornin' and I'll give 'em th' elegant crease in the laundry."

So the first weeks went by, and the two months of Miss Wenzel's stay came to an end. Ted thanked his God and tried hard not to wish that she was a man so that he could punch her head.

The day before the time appointed for her departure she was closeted with Joe Haley for a long, long time. When finally she emerged a bellboy lounged up to Ted with a message.

"Wenzel says th' Old Man wants t' see you. 'S in his office. Say, Mr. Terrill, do yuh think they can play today? It's pretty wet."

Joe Haley was sunk in the depths of

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his big leather chair. He did not look up as Ted entered. "Sit down," he said. Ted sat down and waited, puzzled.

"As a wizard at figures," mused Joe Haley at last, softly as though to himself, "I'm a frost. A column of figures on paper makes my head swim. But I can carry a whole regiment of 'em in my head. I know every time the barkeeper draws one in the dark. I've been watchin' this thing for the last two weeks hopin' you'd quit and come and tell me." He turned suddenly and faced Ted. "Ted, old kid," he said sadly, "what'n'ell made you do it again?"

"What's the joke?" asked Ted.

"Now, Ted," remonstrated Joe Haley, "that way of talkin' won't help matters none. As I said, I'm rotten at figures. But you're the first investment that ever turned out bad, and let me tell you I've handled some mighty bad-smelling ones. Why, kid, if you had just come to me on the quiet and asked for the loan of a hundred or so, why ——"

"What's the joke, Joe?" said Ted again, slowly.

"This ain't my notion of a joke," came the terse answer. "We're $300 short."

The last vestige of Ted Terrill's old-time radiance seemed to flicker and die, leaving him ashen and old.

"Short?" he repeated. Then, "My God!" in a strangely colorless voice — "My God!" He looked down at his fingers impersonally, as though they belonged to someone else. Then his hand clutched Joe Haley's arm with the grip of fear. "Joe! Joe! That's the thing that has haunted me day and night, till my nerves are raw. The fear of doing it again. Don't laugh at me, will you? I used to lie awake nights going over that cursed business of the bank — over and over — till the cold sweat would break out all over me. I used to figure it all out again, step by step, until — Joe, could a man steal and not know it? Could thinking of a thing like that drive a man crazy? Because if it could — if it could — then ——"

"I don't know," said Joe Haley, "but it sounds darned fishy." He had a hand on Ted's shaking shoulder, and was looking into the white, drawn face. "I had great plans for you, Ted. But Minnie Wenzel's got it all down on slips of paper. I might as well call her in again, and we'll have the whole blamed thing out."

Minnie Wenzel came. In her hand were slips of paper, and books with figures in them, and Ted looked and saw things written in his own hand that should not have been there. And he covered his shamed face with his two hands and gave thanks that his mother was dead.

There came three sharp raps at the office door. The tense figures within jumped nervously.

"Keep out!" called Joe Haley, "whoever you are." Whereupon the door opened and Birdie Callahan breezed in.

"Get out, Birdie Callahan," roared Joe. "You're in the wrong pew."

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Birdie closed the door behind her composedly and came farther into the room. "Pete th' pasthry cook just tells me that Minnie Wenzel told th' day clerk, who told the barkeep, who told th' janitor, who told th' chef, who told Pete, that Minnie had caught Ted stealin' some $300."

Ted took a quick step forward. "Birdie, for Heaven's sake, keep out of this. You can't make things any better. You may believe in me, but ——"

"Where's the money?" asked Birdie.

Ted stared at her a moment, his mouth open ludicrously.

"Why — I — don't — know," he articulated, painfully. "I never thought of that."

Birdie snorted defiantly. "I thought so. D'ye know," sociably, "I was visitin' with my aunt Mis' Mulcahy last evenin'."

There was a quick rustle of silks from Minnie Wenzel's direction.

"Say, look here ——" began Joe Haley, impatiently.

"Shut up, Joe Haley!" snapped Birdie. "As I was sayin', I was visitin' with my aunt Mis' Mulcahy. She does fancy washin' an' ironin' for the swells. An' Minnie Wenzel, there bein' none sweller, hires her to do up her weddin' linens. Such smears av hand embridery an' Irish crochet she never see th' likes, Mis' Mulcahy says, and she's seen a lot. And as a special treat to the poor owld soul, why Minnie Wenzel lets her see some av her weddin' clothes. There never yet was a woman who cud resist showin' her weddin' things to every other woman she cud lay hands on. Well, Mis' Mulcahy, she see that grand trewsow and she said she never saw th' beat. Dresses! Well, her going-away suit alone comes to $80, for it's bein' made by Molkowsky, the little Polish tailor. An' her weddin' dress is satin, do yuh mind! Oh, it was a real treat for my aunt Mis' Mulcahy."

Birdie walked over to where Minnie Wenzel sat, very white and still, and pointed a stubby red finger in her face. " 'Tis the grand manager ye are, Miss Wenzel, gettin' satins an' tailor-mades on yer salary. It takes a woman, Minnie Wenzel, to see through a woman's thricks."

"Well I'll be dinged!" exploded Joe Haley.

"Yuh'd better be!" retorted Birdie Callahan.

Minnie Wenzel stood up, her lip caught between her teeth.

"Am I to understand, Joe Haley, that you dare to accuse me of taking your filthy money, instead of that miserable ex-con there who has done time?"

"That'll do, Minnie," said Joe Haley, gently. "That's a-plenty."

"Prove it," went on Minnie, and then looked as though she wished she hadn't.

"A business college edjication is a grand foine thing," observed Birdie. "Miss Wenzel is a graduate av wan. They teach you everything from drawin' birds with tail feathers to plain and fancy penmanship. In fact,

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they teach everything in the writin' line except forgery, an' I ain't so sure they haven't got a coorse in that."

"I don't care," whimpered Minnie Wenzel suddenly, sinking in a limp heap on the floor. "I had to do it. I'm marrying a swell fellow and a girl's got to have some clothes that don't look like a Bird Center dressmaker's work. He's got three sisters. I saw their pictures and they're coming to the wedding. They're the kind that wear low-necked dresses in the evening, and have their hair and nails done downtown. I haven't got a thing but my looks. Could I go to New York dressed like a rube? On the square, Joe, I worked here six years and never took a sou. But things got away from me. The tailor wouldn't finish my suit unless I paid him $50 down. I only took 50 at first, intending to pay it back. Honest to goodness, Joe, I did."

"Cut it out," said Joe Haley, "and get up. I was going to give you a check for your wedding, though I hadn't counted on no 300. We'll call it square. And I hope you'll be happy, but I don't gamble on it. You'll be goin' through your man's pants pockets before you're married a year. You can take your hat and fade. I'd like to know how I'm ever going to square this thing with Ted and Birdie."

"An' me standin' gassin' while them fool girls in the dinin'-room can't set a table decent, and dinner in less than ten minutes," cried Birdie, rushing off. Ted mumbled something unintelligible and at once was after her.

"Birdie! I want to talk to you," he said earnestly.

"Say it quick then," said Birdie, over her shoulder. "The doors open in three minnits."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am. This is no place to talk to you. Will you let me walk home with you tonight after your work's done?"

"Will I?" said Birdie, turning to face him. "I will not. Th' swell mob has shook you, an' a good thing it is. You was travelin' with a bunch of racers, when you was only built for medium speed. Now you've got your chance to a fresh start and don't you ever think I'm going to be the one to let you spoil it by beginnin' to walk out with a dinin'-room Lizzie like me."

"Don't say that, Birdie," Ted put in.

"It's the truth," affirmed Birdie. "Not that I ain't a perfec'ly respectable girrul, and ye know it. I'm a good slob, but folks would be tickled for the chance to say that you had nobody to go with but the likes av me. If I was to let you walk home with me tonight, yuh might be askin' to call next week. Inside half a year, if yuh was lonesome enough, yuh'd ask me to marry yuh. And b'gorra," she said softly, looking down at her unlovely red hands, "I'm dead scared I'd do it. Get back to work, Ted Terrill, and hold yer head up high, and when yuh say your prayers tonight, thank your lucky stars I ain't a hussy."

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Black Mask *is now part of* EQMM

So far our Black Mask section has brought you reprints by Cornell Woolrich, Dashiell Hammett, Raoul Whitfield, and John D. MacDonald, and an original written by a real-life detective, John L. Hayward. Now we give you another original story, another prize-winner in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. This original, by Cary Lucas, is even more in the hardboiled tradition than John L. Hayward's was — or perhaps we should have said, more in the hardboiled tradition as it is exemplified by today's taste.

The present vogue in cheap detective-mystery stories places the emphasis — all the emphasis — on a brutal mixture of sex, sadism, and sensation, spiked with heavy drinking. But it is usually done with such disgusting and artless crudity that the effect is merely sensationalism-for-sensationalism's-sake.

Cary Lucas's "Unknown Quantity" was not written as an imitative pandering to popular taste. True, Mr. Lucas uses the same basic materials, and deals with these materials in the same realistic way; but he handles them unobjectionably from a literary point of view. Here are the coarse criminological causes — sex and hard liquor and tough violence — but treated with much more finesse and subtlety than you will find in the run-of-the-murder shockers.

UNKNOWN QUANTITY

by CARY LUCAS

SHE CAME THROUGH THE DOOR FROM the cocktail lounge and looked at the Lieutenant with this expression of absolute glee, like a kid with a secret too good to keep. So without thinking he smiled back. She put a finger up close to her nose and crooked it at him.

He started toward her.

Then he slowed down. For one thing she wasn't as good, close, as she had looked from across the lobby. Older: say, 30. But pretty, and high as a kite. It was the others joining her that really stopped him; another girl and two men.

When he stopped, she started. She came weaving toward him. He watched her party over her shoulder and they were watching, not angrily, not suspiciously, just watching.

She reached him, the little drunk,

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and grabbed his lapels to steady herself and twinkle up at him. "Hello, you," she said.

He said, "Hello yourself." He glanced down at her, and then back at her party. They didn't move.

She took one hand off him to push the blonde hair back out of her eyes. She ran a finger along his ribbons; her eyes crossed a little from the short focus and she shook her head dizzily. "Hero," she giggled.

The two men looked at each other and one of them, the tall one in uniform — a Major, Medical — said something. The other one, shorter, dark hair thin on top, dinner jacket — the other one moved his shoulders without saying anything and turned as if he were going back to the bar.

There was nobody around the phony-rustic lobby but them. Still, the Lieutenant felt conspicuous, out there under the wagon-wheel chandelier, being watched by the tall cool-looking girl and the Major and the civilian over in the doorway, while the blonde leaned against him and giggled. But there was the feel of her bare shoulders in his fingers.

The tall girl caught at the civilian's arm and he turned back from the bar. She said something to him and started across the lobby. The blonde took her head out of the Lieutenant's ribbons and saw where he was looking, took a quick look herself, and then giggled and said, "Hero," again. She pulled his head down and said, "Decorate'm," and smeared her mouth against his.

He pulled away and the tall girl was there. She looked him up and down and said, "We're ready to go, Lou." She was one who improved when you got closer. She had black hair and pale skin; she wore a long silvery dress with one shoulder strap. But there was something in the uninterested way she brushed him off that got him down.

"Lou seems to like it here," he said.

"Time to go, Lou," she repeated. As if he wasn't there. "We're waiting."

The blonde raised her head and giggled again and then said a word. The tall girl looked bored, if anything. She shrugged the shoulder with a strap on it and turned away.

All this time the dark man was watching and suddenly his face got red and he headed for them. They were all a little drunk. He caught the blonde by the shoulder and pulled at her. "I'm taking her home, Lieutenant," he said.

The blonde pushed the hair back out of her eyes, laughed softly, and began to say all the words, one after the other, as if she were reciting — just stringing them together so they made no sense at all. The dark man turned purple and hit her in the face. The Lieutenant hit him in the face. Then the Major was in it, and a bellboy, and pretty soon there was a crowd and then they were all out in the parking lot, not exactly thrown out but by request.

Nobody really wanted to fight. They stood there feeling like fools.

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"Well," the Lieutenant said, "good night."

"Sorry about all this," the Major said.

"Forget it." The Lieutenant looked at the blonde, sitting on a bumper. "Good night?"

She grabbed at him and pulled herself up. "Oh, no," she giggled. She reached up and got her fingers in his hair, to pull his head down again, and then let out a yip and screamed, "He's bleeding!"

He was, a little. "That ashtray," he said.

"Get in the car," the Major said. "I'm a doctor."

At the cabin the Major took him into a bathroom, shaved a little hair away, and put a bandage on the cut, which wasn't much. The Major owned the place; he called it a cabin — his home was in San Francisco — but it was a fine house disguised with antlers and Navajo rugs and so on. Pickens was his name. The tall girl was his wife.

They went into the living-room for a night-cap with the others. Darling cute Lou was throwing phonograph records on the fire. She sat cross-legged in front of the Capehart and giggled while the Major cursed and began to fish them out of the fireplace.

The dark man — Fred his name was — was glooming over a book. Mrs. Pickens sat on a long sofa with one long arm draped along its back; she looked like a perfume ad. She moved her head a little toward a table behind her and said, "Drink?" — but not as if she really cared. So the Lieutenant said, "Why not?" in the same tone and helped himself.

While he was at it he made one for the Major. The Major came over from the fireplace, took it, and said, "Thanks. Nice to have someone look after me."

"You're so neglected," his wife said.

The Lieutenant waited for the answer but there wasn't any. He realized that Mrs. Pickens was breathing as hard as if she had been running; and then he looked at the Major and noticed the way he was gripping his glass, and he thought, "What the hell?"

Altogether it didn't feel like a party and he was only waiting to finish his drink before he shoved off. But the Major had other ideas. He was already mixing another drink.

When she heard the siphon Mrs. Pickens said, "We'll all have one."

Her husband gave the back of her head a long look before he said anything. "Sure you haven't had enough?"

"Oh," she said, "I'm smarter than I used to be. I know when I've had enough."

The Major stared at her a while longer and then slammed a glass down on the tray and slugged scotch into it.

"Me too!" Lou called gaily.

"S'pose we could make her pass out?" he growled.

The Major took a drink over to

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Lou. When he bent down she grabbed at him and began to muss his thin curly hair. Fred glared and forgot he was pretending to read. Mrs. Pickens got rapidly to her feet, but it was too much for her and she swayed and sat down again, still dignified. She turned her head, smiled charmingly, and said, "Why not sit here with me, Lieutenant?"

Lou had pulled the Major's head down and was kissing him. He didn't really have to hold on to both those drinks. The Lieutenant sized that up, and then Mrs. Pickens, and she looked good all right but he'd had his fight for that evening. "The lady's riding high," he said. "She's flying."

Mrs. Pickens only blinked and said, "Do sit down, you make me nervous. You're the standing-uppingest Lieutenant I ever saw."

So he sat down, but across from her in a chair. She focused on him. The Major was coming back, dabbing at his mouth with a handkerchief. He gave them a feeble grin and Mrs. Pickens smiled charmingly and said, "Do you live around here, Lieutenant?"

Lou sat there giggling to herself. She was certainly a happy drunk. Then she got on all fours and came toward them that way, wagging her head and barking and laughing like crazy. She sighted on the Lieutenant, crawled to him, put her paws on his leg, barked, and climbed onto his lap. "I can talk, too," she giggled. "I'm a talking dog."

"Do you know any talking-dog stories?" he asked, one eye on Fred and the other on his drink. "Have you heard the one about the whippet who lost the race and —"

"Do I know stories. Brother, do I know stories!" She was laughing so she shook. "You want to hear a story about Vegas? You want to hear one about San Francisco? I got all kinds."

"Major Pickens was stationed near Las Vegas for a while," his wife explained politely. "Lou happened to be there too."

"Give that lady a million silver dollars," Lou chuckled. "Slim was there, all right. Boy, that's a hard war around Vegas."

The Lieutenant laughed and said, "That's kind of cute. Slim Pickens."

Lou giggled again. "Or do you want to hear my San Francisco story? It's a honey, sonny. That's where Fred fought the war. Ella too, didn't you, darling? That's Ella over there," she confided to the Lieutenant. "Slim's wife. Easy, we could call her. Easy Pickens. Cute, hey, cute as —"

It got a little mixed up right about there. It seemed as if Mrs. Pickens and her husband and Fred all got to Lou at the same time and the Lieutenant didn't know how they were choosing up sides. They scuffled around a little. The upshot of it was that Lou staggered out of the room by herself, to go to bed, still giggling and talking about her stories, and the rest of them decided to have one more drink to cool off. The Lieutenant knew the feeling he was getting — he knew it was time for him

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to get out of that lash-up; but he had another drink. The four of them sat there and kept at it.

Afterward he had a hazy recollection of finding or being taken to an empty room, and getting his clothes off and falling into bed; but the next thing he remembered clearly was waking up in the dark, at some sound, and turning on a lamp.

Lou was standing there in the doorway, blinking at the light, and trying to blow the hair out of her eyes, laughing. She had a nightgown on and there was a silk thing trailing from one of her hands. "Turn out the light, you silly ape," she giggled, and came weaving toward him.

He felt his muscles tightening as if they were being winched up. "You better get back to bed," he said.

She stopped and her face changed. She stood there a minute, looking foolish, and said something about needing a drink. Then she got herself turned around and headed back to the door; but at the door she started to laugh again and looked back at him. "I'm buying a drink — in case you're thirsty too." She went out. He heard her stumbling along the hall.

He sat there in the bed, staring at the door for quite a while before he turned out the light and lay down. But it was no use. He kept thinking about her down there in the living-room by herself. So after a while he went down.

Then there was a hazy memory of arguing with her, trying to get her to go up to her room again; but it was all hazy. The next clear picture was of waking up in gray daylight. They were all in the room, the Major and his wife and Fred. It was the living-room and they were standing around the sofa, looking down at a long bundle wrapped in a Navajo rug. He was in a chair, the same chair as the night before, under another Navajo.

Then they were looking at him. He lay there with his head fuzzy, feeling his muscles beginning to ache, trying to remember who they were and where he was and why. The room looked different in the dirty light.

The Major came and stood over him and said, "Why did you kill her?"

He almost laughed. Then he saw the service .45 in the Major's hand, and the blonde hair at the end of the long bundle on the sofa.

The Lieutenant eased himself up, holding the Navajo close. The Major backed up, not saying anything. The Lieutenant got delicately to his feet and hunched the rug over his shoulders and walked halfway to the sofa; then he knew. Mrs. Pickens's face swung around and looked at him.

"Can I have my clothes?" he said.

The Major took his wife's arm with his free hand and turned her toward the hall. He gave her a little push and she started walking out.

The Major motioned the Lieutenant over against a wall. He bent over and moved the bundle on the sofa; an arm flopped out and dangled.

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He looked closely, straightened up, and said, "Strangled."

"Wait a minute," the Lieutenant said.

They waited. But he couldn't think of anything to say.

The Major said, "Will you do the phoning, Fred?"

The dark man tried to say something but just shook his head. He looked sick.

Mrs. Pickens came in with the clothes and her eyes went straight to the sofa. Her husband took the pants and threw them to the Lieutenant. The Lieutenant got them on, and the Major took the Navajo and threw it over Lou so that it covered the dangling arm, and her head. He turned back to the Lieutenant. "You wanted to say something."

He was still confused. "Give me a minute."

"Stay here, Fred."

The dark man was going out the door. He stopped. "What for?"

"Just stay here."

Mrs. Pickens turned and stared at her husband.

"I don't get it," Fred said. "I want to put on my bathrobe."

"Not now. Come back and sit down. You too, Ella."

Fred hesitated, his face twitching. Then he came in, and he and Mrs. Pickens went to a settee and sat.

"You," the Major said. "Take her to her room."

The Lieutenant jerked. "What?"

"You heard me. Pick her up and carry her to her room."

There was no use arguing. He tried to slide the edges of the Navajos under her so that he wouldn't have to touch her skin, but he did. The body was a little stiff. With the Major behind him, he took her up the stairs and laid her on a mussed bed, and pulled the sheet over her; then he pulled off the Navajos. They went back and the Major motioned him to that chair again, the one he had finished the night in, the one he'd been sitting in when Lou barked like a dog and crawled into his lap. The others hadn't moved.

The Major stood near the door with his gun, but not holding it any particular way. It was hard to tell whom he had in mind when he said, "Talk."

His wife suddenly gave a sort of gasp and the little color in her face drained out of it, so that the smudged mascara and lipstick she had fallen into bed with stood out like a mustache on a subway poster.

"You, Lieutenant," the Major said. "Talk."

"I'll do my talking to the police," he said.

The phone was right beside the Major but he didn't even look at it. "No explanation?"

"You saw the picture. You made up your mind."

The girl was staring at him with horror in her big eyes. "Why did you stay there with her?" she whispered.

"You know why," he said. "Because I didn't know she was dead."

Fred jumped up. "Shoot him,

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Slim! What's the use of wasting time?" he shouted.

"Shut up and sit down," the Major said.

"Self-defense," Fred said eagerly. "We'll back you up, Slim. Self-defense. You caught him red-handed and he went for you and —"

The room got quiet. Fred's eyes traveled to each of them in turn and he stood for a minute with his mouth open; then he slowly sat down. Mrs. Pickens began to inch sideways on the settee, away from him.

"Let's call the police," the Lieutenant said. "We're wasting time."

"No hurry," said the Major. "By the way, were you out of the room any of the time Lou was here?"

"As a matter of —"

"Sit still, Fred," snapped the Major.

They all looked at Fred.

"As a matter of fact, I was," the Lieutenant said. "Five or ten minutes."

The Major nodded. "I thought you might have been. Lou say anything when you came back?"

"No, I couldn't wake her up. I was trying to get her to go back to her room but —" And then it hit him. He stopped.

"Well?"

"I — guess I passed out."

"No, you don't!" Fred said. "No — you — don't!"

"No we don't what?" the Major asked calmly.

"You think I don't know what you're doing. You think I don't know what you're driving at. You think —"

"Nobody mentioned you."

"You didn't have to." Fred's voice started to go up. "You might as well shout. You're thinking about what she said, about Vegas and all. You —"

"Shut up, Fred."

"Shut up, sure. Shut up and let you fix things up to suit yourself. You think —" Suddenly his face crumpled and tears began to run down his cheeks. "I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't do a thing like that. No matter what," he sobbed. "You're forgetting, Lou was my — my *girl*. I was in love with her — can't you get that through your head? Maybe to you she was just somebody to —"

The Lieutenant said, "Why don't we call the police?"

"Jealousy can drive people crazy, I guess," the Major said thoughtfully.

Fred breathed loudly and didn't say anything more. Then his face changed. His eyes opened wide, the tears running down, and he turned toward Mrs. Pickens. "Jealousy." His breath came out and made the word on the way, so that it was all air.

She paid no attention to him. She was staring at the Lieutenant with her teeth showing in a kind of fascinated grin. "When you came back," she said. "When you came back and thought she had passed out, did you —"

The Major got to her in two steps and slapped her so hard there was a red grid on her cheek. She hardly noticed until Fred grabbed her shoulder and began to shake her. "Jeal-

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ousy!" he hoarsely breathed out again.

She jerked her head around, felt her cheek, and looked at Fred, her head wobbling as he shook her. "You hit me," she said.

"Ella!" the Major said sharply. "I hit you."

"Why?" she asked. She sounded bewildered.

"Answer me!" Fred yelled. "Admit it! I saw your face when she was kissing Slim last night, don't think I didn't. We all did. You could have killed her then. And all that talk about Vegas — you said yourself you had enough, we all heard you, and you couldn't stand it any more, could you!"

"Me?" She shook her head and her hair was all over her face. She pulled away from Fred and pushed her hair back. "Me? You mean *I* killed her?" She tried to laugh, crazily. "That's insane. Insane!"

"Like Slim said!" Fred shouted. "Crazy with jealousy!"

"But — why, I couldn't have! I slept with Slim, I was with him every minute. Tell him, Slim, tell the crazy fool, you'd have known if —"

"I would have," the Major said. "Only you didn't."

His wife pushed her hair around and stared at him. "I didn't? Didn't sleep with you? You're saying I didn't —"

"I came and woke you up just now, if you remember."

"Slim!" she screamed.

"We went to bed together —"

"But you got up. I remember." She stared at him. "Sometime while it was still dark. I woke up and I was alone. And then —"

"That's it," Fred shouted. "When she was alone, that's when she did it!"

But she didn't pay any attention to Fred. She was staring at the Major. "You. You came and told me. You found her."

"Don't get hysterical, Ella."

"*You* —" Her voice died away and her eyes got bigger and bigger, and she shrank back into the settee as if she were trying to push through it. "You came and told me," she whispered. "You found her. You had some reason. You were looking for her. Why? How did you happen to be here, to get up, how did you happen to come in here? You were looking for her and you found her and — and — *Slim!*"

"That's enough," he said.

"Oh, no," she said louder. "Not by a damsite. Nobody else went near her. Vegas. She was talking too much. You're the doctor, you're the one who said she'd been dead for hours. Nobody else touched her!" She didn't take her eyes from her husband but the question was not for him, it was for the Lieutenant. "Did you touch her? Was she really cold?" She began to writhe along the settee toward the door. "Maybe it's not too late to find out. We'll go up there, all of us, and find out. We'll settle this —"

She was halfway to her feet but his voice stopped her and pushed her back. "No," he said.

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The Lieutenant said, "She was cold."

"That doesn't count. It could have been earlier. I don't know when you got up. It was dark when I missed you." She whispered, "Slim."

The Major had stopped listening to her. He was looking at the Lieutenant. "Let's stick to the facts," he said calmly.

"Sure. Let's call the police and tell them the facts."

"There's no hurry," the Major said again.

"You keep saying that. But I'm in a hurry. I've got a seat on the 11 o'clock plane. Sooner this is straightened out so I can leave, the better I'll like it."

"Are you serious?"

"None of this is very funny."

"You're not expecting any trouble?"

"Not very much, no. Why should I?"

"He thinks he'll get away with it," Fred shouted. "Shoot him!"

"Shut up, Fred . . . I'd expect some trouble, if I were you."

The Lieutenant shrugged. "I'm a stranger here myself. Lot of people in the hotel saw me meet you people for the first time last night. Saw the brawl you started, the way you were looking for trouble, fighting among yourselves. Why would I want to kill any of you?"

"You make it sound simple."

"For me it is."

"Just for you."

"Of course," the Lieutenant admitted, "that won't be the end of it."

"No."

"Somebody's got to explain things."

"That may be messy," the Major said gravely.

"For the one who made the mess."

There was a little silence, and then the Major said thoughtfully, "Of course, you've been overseas."

"That's right."

"Back long?"

"Not long."

"Action?"

"Some."

"Have a bad time?"

"Lots had it worse."

"Combat infantry . . . Hits some men pretty hard."

"I know."

"Go completely haywire, some of them. Not right away, but afterwards."

"I've heard of it."

"Not my field, I'm a T.B. man; but I've seen quite a few cases."

"Must be interesting."

"Oh, yes. Never know when the trouble will break out, or how. Persecution complex, megalomania — takes a lot of different forms."

"That so?"

"Unpredictable stuff. Surprises the man himself as much as anybody. That's why we worry. We don't know whether we've got all the cases under control."

"I see."

"For example. You know the first thing I looked for when I found Lou was dead?"

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"Couldn't even guess."

"A cross. Something made into a cross. Like —" Without even hesitating the Major crossed over to the fireplace and took down the two long flintlock rifles that hung over it and arranged them in a big X over the mantel. "Like that."

The Lieutenant looked at them with no expression on his face and said, "Why like that?"

"If I'd found those two guns arranged in a cross I'd have known that a man we've been looking for was here. He always signs his jobs that way."

"X marks the spot?"

"That may be what he means."

"Very interesting, Major."

"I think so. That man happens to be a strangler, you see."

"I suppose he resembles me, too?"

"Oh, we haven't had any idea what he looks like, really. Vague descriptions."

"I see."

"We'll be glad to catch up with him."

The Lieutenant smiled at him evenly and said, "When you do . . . Funny thing is, I *had* heard about these cases, and believe it or not I was just a little worried about myself."

"Yes, that's very funny."

"So when I checked in stateside I put in for a special going-over. Just for my own satisfaction, you understand."

"And they gave you the works?"

"Sure did. The whole routine."

"Very sensible of you. How'd you come out?"

"Oh, clean as a whistle."

"Too bad those tests aren't conclusive."

"Aren't they?"

"Afraid not. Some of our worst cases passed those tests with high marks."

"Anyhow, it was a load off my mind . . . Ever taken those tests yourself, Major?"

"Why, no, I can't say I have. But I don't need to."

"Oh?"

"My nerves are like rock. I'd never kill anybody."

The Lieutenant nodded at the gun in the Major's hand, which he never looked at but never put down. "Glad to hear it."

"Except, of course, in self-defense."

"Maybe it's lucky I haven't got a gun."

"Why?"

"You won't have to defend yourself against me."

"Not from a gun, no. But of course there's more than one kind of danger."

Suddenly the girl screamed out at the Lieutenant. "Stop it, stop it! Can't you see what he's doing, you fool, can't you see what he's working himself up to —"

"Quiet, Ella," the Major said when she gulped for breath.

"Can't you see he doesn't care about you — you're expendable, you 90-day wonder, you're expendable!"

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She broke down altogether and cried.

The Lieutenant nodded. "I know. But I think you're too smart for a fool play like that, Major."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Those other kinds of danger — they'd be hard to explain to a court-martial."

"Maybe you have got a gun."

"Sure, you might find one on me afterward."

"A detail."

"But what happens when there's another job signed with an X?"

"Let's not look so far ahead."

The Lieutenant got up, moving as carefully as if he were afraid of breaking something. He stretched and then sat carefully on the arm of the same chair. Then he said, "That wouldn't solve a damn thing, you know."

"It would answer a lot of questions."

"Not all of them. And this isn't the end of the world."

"You might call it a reasonable facsimile."

"For one of us. But there are four of us."

"Leaving three."

"That's just it."

"Oh?"

"I'm not so sure I wouldn't just as soon be the one, as one of the three," the Lieutenant said. "It's quick . . . Especially the one of the three who — defended himself."

"Why's that, Lieutenant?"

"Why, I'd hate to have my future in the hands of any one of you. If you don't mind my being frank."

"Oh, go right ahead."

"I just wouldn't feel comfortable. Having to depend on two people to keep telling the same story for the rest of my life. Especially those two."

They were talking as if they were alone. The Major nodded thoughtfully. "I see what you mean."

"Especially," the Lieutenant went on in the same tone, "when I was pretty sure one of them had a guilty conscience. Just between you and me I don't think you did this thing."

"Just between you and me I think you did."

The Lieutenant produced a small smile. "Or you've decided to . . . No, a guilty conscience makes people too nervous. You can't depend on them."

"You may be right."

"I was thinking —" The Lieutenant hesitated. "If you ask me, I don't see why anyone should have to have a bad conscience. Personally it looks to me as if Lou had a tragic accident."

A laugh came out of the Major, like a belch. "Well, that's one way to look at it."

"What I mean — you're always hearing of these cases. People take some sleeping powders, or go to bed good and tight the way Lou did, and in the night the pillow gets over their faces and they're too far under to be bothered, and they suffocate. Damn shame, but it certainly happens. Right along."

For quite a while the Major stared at the Lieutenant without any ex-

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pression at all. Then his eyes wandered to the fireplace, and he went to it, and slowly replaced the rifles the way they had been. He had dropped the gun in his bathrobe pocket so that he would have both hands free, and he had left it there.

The Lieutenant said, "I liked them better the first way, too."

Without turning around the Major said, "Pillows don't leave bruises on the throat."

"That's one advantage of having a doctor in the house. I'd guess that small-town coroners don't like trouble. If there's a death certificate waiting, I'd guess they'd just go through the motions."

With sudden decision the Major looked at his watch and said, "You could still make the plane if I ran you down to the airport."

"I guess I could."

"I could have your things sent on from the hotel afterwards."

"I'll write for them."

"I could bring the Sheriff back with me."

"Sure."

The Major said briskly, "Ella, Fred, get your clothes on. Ella! Fred!"

They raised their heads.

"Listen to me, now. Lou slept in her room by herself. We found her there this morning. Just as she is. No one has touched her."

They nodded apathetically.

"All right, now go to your rooms and get dressed. I'll be back in half an hour." They did not stir. "Go on!"

They rose and shambled through the door. The Major shook his head a little, watching them, then turned back to the Lieutenant. "I'll just put on my shoes and a topcoat, and be right with you."

The Lieutenant watched the Major go out of the room. He sat still for a minute. Then suddenly he slid from the arm of the chair into its seat, put his face in his hands, and shook all over.

When the Major called, "I'll get the car out and pick you up in front," the Lieutenant stiffened and nodded a couple of times, then got out, "All right." He heard a door close.

He stood up and looked around vacantly. His eyes caught on the mantel and went back to it. He started toward it, and on the floor behind the sofa he found a little heap of silk — Lou's nightgown; he picked it up and took it to the fireplace. He looked at the rifles for a moment, and his shoulders began to shake. He put the rifles back in a big X and draped the nightgown over them. He was laughing so hard he could hardly manage it; but when the horn tooted outside he got his face straight before he opened the door, and called, "Right with you, Major," and closed the door behind him.

Black Mask *section continued on next page*

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Black Mask Magazine . . .

When we think of the hardboiled story, what background usually comes to our minds? The underworld of a big city, peopled with gangsters, racketeers, and cheap chiselers — a shady or dark world where there is little sunlight and very little fresh air. Somehow we don't think of the wide open spaces or of the woods where beaver, bear, and fox live. But the woods can be the background of as hard and tough a story as ever took place in a gambling den, night club, or slum-tenement hideout; and the strong, silent creatures of the woods can be as ruthless as the strong, silent cretins of city streets.

CODE OF THE UNDERWORLD

by JIM KJELGAARD

BUNDERS RAISED HIS HEAD UNTIL his temple and eyes protruded over the big gray rock behind which he knelt. With one hand he reached down to grasp the rifle leaning on the rock beside him.

Two hundred yards below, a huge beaver dimpled the surface of a dammed-up pool. Bunders watched steadily as the beaver climbed out of the water onto the dam and started fussing with an aspen stick. Bunders's eyes strayed back to the cabin beside the pool.

It was a square cabin, the uncut ends of the logs of which it was built protruding past the corners like ragged fangs. A curl of blue smoke waved out of the chimney. Beside the cabin Bunders counted seven black bear pelts stretched on wooden frames. In front of them was a wooden cache, built on tall, sturdy stilts.

George Sands came out of the cabin and walked the few feet to the edge of the pool. The beaver scrambled into the water and left a curling wave in his wake as he swam across the pool to the man.

Climbing out, the beaver reared against Sands's leg. The man scratched the animal's head, seemed to be talking to it. Crazy! — that's what Sands must be. But he brought more fur out of the woods than any other trapper. It had taken Bunders two years to locate him. Which meant that Sands's dead body never would be found.

Bunders picked up the rifle, rested it across the rock, drew a good bead, and shot. The man straightened up, for a moment stood rigidly, then fell heavily backwards. His left hand rose in the air, extended straight above his head, and beat up and down on the

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ground. One blow hit the beaver as it slid swiftly into the water before it dived.

Bunders started down the boulder-strewn slope.

Except for his eyes, that were blinking, Sands lay perfectly motionless when Bunders got to him. There was a bright splash of blood on his lips, but where the blood had run down into his whiskers it had only made them wet. Beneath the shock and agony Bunders's bullet had brought, the man's face still had in it something of the simplicity that had been its distinguishing mark.

Bunders looked from the dying man to the dammed-up pool. The beaver was there again, swimming about in excited circles. Close up he looked much bigger than at a distance — was easily the biggest beaver Bunders had ever seen. A single bead of blood appeared brightly red against the animal's dark muzzle. Going through the trapper, the bullet had mushroomed, and a flying fragment of lead had no doubt struck the beaver. Bunders raised the rifle. With another splash of his tail, the beaver dived again.

Bunders shot the dying trapper through the head. He carried the body up among a nest of boulders, dumped it in a fissure, covered it with other boulders, and returned to the cabin.

He inspected the pelts in the cache and his eyes danced with ecstasy as he fingered the dozens of prime beaver, lynx, marten, fisher, and fox skins. There was a pile of twenty dried bear hides besides those on the frames. Bunders could sell those pelts and have enough money to live in luxury for the next two years.

However, he would have to pack them all down to Windy River where he had a canoe waiting. It was a full day's trip down to Windy River and back, and since this was already afternoon, it was no use starting before morning. He would wait in the cabin tonight.

While waiting, he would catch that beaver. Bunders took ten of George Sands's traps from the cabin and set them in the beaver pool.

Bunders slept in the cabin that night, and was up early. He walked down to the beaver dam. One of the traps, set on the edge of the dam, was sprung and dragged the length of the chain into the water. But the beaver had pulled out. Bunders studied the dam. There was, he decided, only the big beaver living in it. A pet of the murdered trapper, doubtless he was accustomed to men and not much afraid of them. But the fact that he had had his toes pinched would make him wary of traps. Probably now he was hiding in the conical house that rose in the center of the pool.

Bunders returned to the cabin for an axe. He chopped down a four-inch aspen and cut a pry seven feet long and three inches through at the butt. He went back to the dam, hammered the end of the pry into the bottom with the flat side of the axe, and

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lifted up on it. Water spilled from the break he made, and the force of the water enlarged the hole. Bunders stood with rifle ready. When the water was drained out of the pool, the beaver would come out or could be forced out of the house.

Below the dam the water became roily, full of floating sticks and debris. The quiet little stream roared. Riffles flowed where there had been only water trickling over rocks. The beaver house showed strangely distorted and overlarge because there was no water around it. The mud in the bottom of the drained pool sucked at Bunders's feet as he walked out to the house.

Then a splashing a hundred yards upstream attracted his attention. The big beaver emerged from a pool, splashed over some shallow riffles, and dived into another pool. Bunders shot, saw his bullet bite into the water six inches behind the fleeing beaver.

For a moment Bunders stood where he was while anger made his face crimson. The beaver had completely outwitted him. Instead of staying in the house when the dam broke, it had come out while there was still enough water in the dam to cover him, and run upstream under overhanging banks. Bunders took a step to follow. Aside from the value of the pelt, he would get this beaver now if only to show that he could.

But he thought better of the decision to follow immediately, That would only keep the beaver running. The stream was small, and this was close enough to the head of the valley so that probably there were no tributary streams. No beaver would go a long way from water and none were safe without a dam. Due to their habit of cutting down trees, which both furnished food and gave material for dams and houses, all beavers left perfectly plain evidence of where they went.

If Bunders waited and gave the beaver a chance to recover from his fright, undoubtedly the beaver would stop to build another dam. It would be much easier to trap him there than it would be to go searching for him under banks and in crevices along the banks. All Bunders would have to do was follow the stream. He could afford to give another day to the beaver hunt. There was no special hurry about getting the pelts down to the river.

Bunders spent the morning and part of the afternoon making the pelts up into packs, and it was mid-afternoon when he set out. A mile up from the cabin he found the beaver's webbed tracks across a mud bar, and evidence of where the beaver had cut a few stalks of willow brush. But apparently the animal had not tarried.

Bunders kept on. The stream grew smaller the closer to its source he got, and at length it was a mere trickle. Bunders came out of the aspen brush into a stand of great hardwoods, beech and birch trees. In places the wind had blown them down across

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the stream and formed deep dams. There was no more sign of the beaver, but Bunders walked on in confidence that he had not stopped here either. Beavers preferred small trees, aspen if they could get it. These towering hardwoods were too big for a beaver to handle.

A little farther up, the stream made a right-angle bend. The hills were very low here, and the stream only a foot wide. Tiny trout, lurking in the center of it, drifted like shadows to the shelter of the banks as Bunders disturbed them. He came out of the hardwoods into another aspen forest. Great boulders jutted from the sides of the hills. There were big rocks in the stream, too, and it made hard walking. Bunders climbed out of the stream to walk along the right-hand bank.

At last he came to the spring where the stream had its source, and looked down into it.

In the bottom of a funnel-shaped hole, the spring was a crystal pool five feet across and two deep. Extending up from the edges of the water a band of moist mud showed that, in times of heavy rains or melting snow, the spring rose at least ten feet higher than it was now. Over the mud, the top of the hole was ribbed with rocks, under which were crevices. The spring emptied itself between two huge boulders that were buried deeply in the sides of the ridge. The opening between them was scarcely a foot wide.

Evidently many bears visited the spring to wallow in the mud, but most of the bear tracks were old. The tracks of the big beaver led under a crevice near the spring. Bunders's little eyes glittered. The beaver could not possibly escape him again.

Bunders cut the six-foot top of an aspen with his hunting knife and trimmed off the small branches. He threw it down beside the spring. He would poke the beaver out of the crevice with the flexible pole and shoot it.

He laid his rifle down, grasped an aspen that leaned over the spring, hung a minute, and let himself go. He landed lightly in the mud and started down to pick up his pole.

Something leaped out of the mud to grasp his right foot and he was fast in one of the murdered trapper's bear traps.

Bunders knew what to do. He was wearing a heavy, knee-length leather boot. Lacking a clamp to press the springs down, he could not unfasten the trap. If he tried to pull out, the jaws of the trap would cut through the boot into his leg.

Nevertheless there was a way out. The end of the trap chain was buried in the mud. Bunders knew that it was fastened to a buried log or rock. It might be a long job, but he could dig that log or rock free. Dragging both it and the trap, being very careful not to injure his right foot, he would then be able to crawl out of the spring hole back to his rifle and shoot the trap off.

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Bunders sat down. He grasped the trap with both hands, and moving it as gently as he could, maneuvered it around so the chain was slack and his right leg was arranged in the most comfortable position the circumstances would permit. His left leg was straight, with the heel of his left boot ten inches away from the water. He took his hunting knife and plunged it into the mud some three inches to one side of the deeply buried chain.

But the mud was only a thin crust covering a bed of pebbles and grit. Bunders gasped as he felt the knife blade break. When he drew it out of the mud, only half the six-inch blade remained on the hilt.

Bunders's face quickly became damp with sweat. His heart beat fast. But he could still dig the buried trap out with only half the knife. Grimly, and more cautiously, he set to work.

Loosening a few pebbles or a handful of gravel at a time, and scraping them out with his hand, Bunders enlarged the hole. It was slow work and night had fallen before he reached the log to which the trap was fastened. He tried to move it, but the packed pebbles and grit held it fast. However, just reaching it was a small triumph and gave him some relief. He sat back to rest.

Deep in the forest a wolf howled, and as though that were a starting signal, all the little noises that were part of the wilderness night began at once. From the rim of the spring came a gritting sound as of one rough surface rubbing on another.

It was soon followed by a slight crash — something had fallen. Bunders strained his ears, but a few minutes elapsed before he placed the sound. The beaver had come out of his crevice, left the spring, and cut down a tree.

Little throbbing pains traveled up and down Bunders's trapped leg, and his free leg was cramped. Bunders moved it slightly, and almost unendurable agony shot through his entire body. For five minutes he sat with teeth clenched while sweat poured from him. Then the pain subsided. Cautiously he moved his arms and shoulders, and found that he could do so without abnormal torture. He leaned forward to resume the slow task of digging out the log.

From time to time he heard the beaver moving about, going up and down the bank or gnawing trees. The beaver had lived close to man long enough so that one's presence no longer terrified it. The blow from Sands's fist, the bullet burn, the trap — these had combined to frighten him, but now his fear was passing.

Two hours passed, and Bunders stopped again to rest. The throbbing pain in his right leg had neither lessened nor increased. But his left leg, held for hours in one position, seemed both cold and full of little needles that stabbed deep and were withdrawn to stab again. Bunders sat uncertainly, hesitating to move because of the pain he knew motion would

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bring. But at last he felt he could not stand his cramped position any longer.

He moved his free leg, ever so little. His whole body grew rigid. For a space of 30 seconds he sat tensely, not daring to believe the thing he felt. Then scream after scream broke from his throat and like a mad thing he fell to fighting the trap. He threshed insanely until he was exhausted and fell panting in the mud. For a bit there was silence. Presently, on the rim of the spring, he heard the beaver resume his steady gnawing.

Bunders's free leg had come out of three inches of water.

Early the next morning a little bear came down to the spring to wallow in the mud.

He found the place where a beaver had built a strong dam by closing a crevice between two big rocks. The dam was very deep and very muddy.

The little bear turned away. He couldn't get into the mud. And beneath the roily water he couldn't see the still, limp, swaying thing that had been a man.

"*All these clues and motives — I feel like a character in a thirty-five cent reprint.*"

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

". . . a warm story which introduces a truly new detective . . . a fine human relations job . . ." (DBH)	"Fast moving with excellent suspense . . . a truly dramatic climax." (FC)	
". . . thoroughly satisfactory . . . Author's skill at plotting is undiminished." (AdV)	". . . quite good . . . usual skill . . . a well-reasoned and satisfactory solution." (H-M)	*KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES* AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times* FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville (Ind.) Press* DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune* H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Westport (Conn.) Town Crier* DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News* LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle* FP: *Fay Profilet in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch* AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*
". . . complicated puzzle . . . civilized and eminently plausible. Fine." (AdV)	"A dandy Murdock mystery. Fast moving and credible." (FC)	
"Harrowing, if contrived tale . . . expertly engineered and undeniably exciting. Smooth." (AdV)	". . . theme is beautifully handled throughout. Another A plus Holding mystery." (FC)	
"Unique emulsion of the rowdy and the respectable, written with a sure hand . . ." (AdV)	"Some . . . rich drollery . . . skilfully written and uniquely original divertissement." (DD)	
". . . *tout-à-fait Francais* and *vraie Parisienne* . . . and a good suspense story, too!" (H-M)	". . . only a moderately engaging evening or so with a drab assortment of young expatriates . . ." (DD)	
"Delicately and plausibly handled, and genuinely chilling. Shuddery." (AdV)	". . . a tale of mystery and menace . . . subtly presented, pleasantly long-drawn suspense . . ." (H-M)	
"Gruesome and marred by annoying levity but nevertheless a soundly plotted job . . . Historically Important." (AdV)	"A tough, fast-moving tale, served with blondes, guns, and plenty of drinks." (FC)	

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WINNER OF A THIRD PRIZE

With his prize-winning story in last year's contest, James Yaffe enters "the third stage" of his development, so far as EQMM (which published Mr. Yaffe's first story) is concerned. The "first stage" produced clever but artificial stories; the "second stage" retained the ingenuity but diluted the artificiality — surely the stories about Mom, of the Bronx, were far more realistic than the earlier tales of Paul Dawn. And now, in the "third stage," James Yaffe gives us a "suspense" story — a story that foregoes cleverness for cleverness's sake, a story based on character and on emotional and psychological content.

James Yaffe has always known exactly where he is going. He is no less certain in his newest story. He realizes, for example, that calling "On the Brink" a suspense story is not entirely accurate — at least, it does not really describe what he set out to accomplish. The true emphasis in the story is on the people, and on the deeper meanings which Mr. Yaffe tried to project — the meanings that emerge from the struggles of the characters. What are these deeper meanings? For Mr. Yaffe, there are two: first, he has tried to show what he calls the "humanity" of crime — that is, "that the potentiality for doing an evil, criminal thing is very human, common to us all, not a special trait restricted to a group of human monsters; the most decent, high-minded person may, under pressing circumstances, consider the act of murder, and this fact should serve as a warning to us all, a reminder that no man is born good or evil, but must make the choice every day of his life with all the will power, good sense, and humane feeling at his command."

The second meaning is equally important, perhaps even more important. Mr. Yaffe has tried to touch on one of the great dangers — possibly the greatest danger — of our times: that, "in our anger at all the violence and injustice in the world, in our desire to do something about it, we should ourselves turn into violent, unjust men, we should drag ourselves down to the level of those whom we are trying to fight; this danger comprehends everything from 'witch hunts' to the personal, individual struggle which we go through every day in our dealings with people whom we may not happen to like or agree with."

Big aims, big purposes . . . but the very stuff of the modern detective story, which has always been the most democratic form of literature and has always brought light to dark corners.

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ON THE BRINK

by JAMES YAFFE

THE GREAT DIFFICULTY WAS THAT Hannah Aaronson had so little experience with murder. If it had only been a question of inventing a new recipe for potato pancakes for her sister Elsie's cook, or of amusing one of her small nieces or nephews on a rainy afternoon, Hannah wouldn't have had any trouble at all. "Hannah can do anything!" — that was what her dear friend Miss Pincus, who shared her apartment on West End Avenue, always said about her. And even allowing for poor Miss Pincus's tendency toward breathless exaggeration, it *was* true that when it came to the everyday routine problems of life Hannah was a very capable person. — As for dealing with murder, though! Well, it was really out of her line.

Nevertheless, a person can teach herself how to do a great many unfamiliar things if she only wants to badly enough. This had always been Hannah's philosophy of life, and right now was certainly the time to put it into practice. Right now, when nothing less was at stake than the whole future happiness, the peace of mind, maybe even the life, of the young man she loved most dearly in all the world.

People often commented on Hannah's feelings for her nephew, Mark Wechsler. "Typical old-maid mother complex," they said. "Never having had any children of her own, she naturally bestows an abnormal amount of affection on her sister's child." People said this behind her back, but Hannah knew they were saying it. It simply made her smile to herself. "When I was a girl," she remarked once to Miss Pincus, "we would have wondered how you could bestow *too* much affection on a child. But nowadays they have Modern Psychology, you know, which really saves everybody a great deal of trouble."

So she was fond of her nephew Mark, and not the least bit ashamed of it, either. He was a boy that any aunt could be proud of. Not exactly handsome, maybe, but he had a strong, forceful, intellectual sort of face, dark hair, deep thoughtful eyes, and a mouth that was more often frowning than not. On the whole, he gave the impression of having all sorts of profound ideas in his head.

Which was absolutely true, as his record proved. In high school he was always at the top of his class, especially in such subjects as literature and art. When he was graduated from college, he definitely would have been Phi Beta Kappa, if only his marks had been a little higher. And now, less than three years after graduation, he was already recognized — in certain circles — as a most promising young painter. Next Spring, in fact, he was going to have a one-man show at one of the smaller galleries —

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smaller, but very highly thought of! That was the kind of remarkable nephew Hannah had, and she never hesitated to tell people about him.

Nor did she ever hesitate to stick up for him when somebody belittled him, or to give him all her help when he was in trouble. In this connection, she was especially concerned at the tension that existed between Mark and his father.

Hannah's brother-in-law, Ben Wechsler, certainly wasn't an easy man to live with. He had his own ideas about life, and he seldom gave much thought or consideration to people who disagreed with his ideas or stood in their way. But the most trying thing about him was that he always seemed so easygoing and good-humored. Nothing could make him lose his temper, or stop his soft genial chuckle, or ruffle his pleasant smile.

Right away, as far back as when he was a little boy, Mark just didn't get along with Ben. A sensitive, idealistic boy like that — it was only natural that he should wince at a dozen painful things that Ben said to him every day. And it was only natural, too, that a practical, down-to-earth businessman like Ben (who could never quite understand how a son like Mark was ever born to him) should go out of his way to say those painful things. Yes, it *was* only natural, Hannah kept telling herself. It was her duty as a generous, humane person to see Ben's side of the question, too!

And so, from her little apartment in the faded old hotel on West End Avenue, Hannah watched the struggle as it went on through the years. At first, when Mark was small, the victories were all on Ben's side. With a chuckle and a quiet word or two he could sting the boy with humiliation, bring tears to his eyes, keep him tossing in his bed at night completely bewildered and blaming himself for his terrible thoughts about his father.

It was during this period that Mark first got into the habit of coming to his Aunt Hannah, to cry on her shoulder, and to smile and laugh again as she told him one of her funny stories. It was really his mother who should have done this for him. But Hannah's poor sister Elsie, she was so frightened of Ben herself — she would practically jump out of her skin if he so much as grunted at her — and he had warned her so many times about "spoiling the boy!"

Later on, Mark grew more able to fight his own battles. This was when that dark, stubborn, moody look first came into his face, and set there as if he'd been born with it. But he still didn't give up his visits to his old-maid aunt, and so Hannah was always the first to hear the details of each encounter.

She sat back and watched the rage that burned in Mark, all through high school, at his father's treatment of his mother. She knew all about those dinner-table scenes at which Mark would flare up at every sarcastic remark that Ben made to Elsie. It was through Hannah's influence, in fact, that Mark gave up making those

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scenes. She told him how much pain he was giving his mother in his efforts to help her. She said that this was one of the things young people found it so hard to learn — not to rush ahead furiously without considering everyone's feelings. He took her lesson to heart, too — at least, he tried to sometimes — and this was a deep satisfaction to Hannah. A headstrong, idealistic boy like Mark — there weren't many people whose lessons he bothered to listen to!

Later, when Mark started at college, Hannah comforted and encouraged him in his big fight to major in Painting, instead of in Economics as Ben wanted him to do. And when he got out of college, Hannah took his part in his even bigger fight to set up a studio and become a painter in earnest, instead of going into the dress business with Ben. And finally, only last year, Hannah was right behind him in his biggest fight, the one over his marriage to Linda. Hannah heard it all, the terrible wounding things that were said back and forth — Ben's remarks about Linda's being a scheming gold-digger who only wanted Mark for his father's money, the accusations Mark hurled back at Ben about the methods he had used to make that money!

It was this fight, and the quick City Hall ceremony following it, that led to the final break between her nephew and her brother-in-law. Mark was angrier than she had ever seen him — his anger even frightened her a little — and he swore he would never see his father again. One whole night Hannah pleaded with him. It just didn't do any good.

As for Ben — there was no use pleading with Ben. His usual good humor wasn't the least bit disturbed by the whole affair. He just waved it away. "Why talk to *me* about it?" he said cheerfully. "What happens now is up to *him*. If he comes to me and apologizes and agrees to go into the business, I'll forgive him. Providing, of course, he don't expect me to have anything to do with that little gold-digger. Otherwise —" And Ben smiled and spread his hands.

That's how the situation stood. A most distressing situation! And Hannah, who believed that families ought to stick together no matter what, never gave up hope of mending it some day. But that was before it turned into a question of murder.

It was Linda's illness that made it take that dreadful turn. She was never a strong girl, Mark's Linda — pretty and sweet and shy, but delicate, sort of fragile. Hannah noticed it the first time she met the girl, though she naturally didn't say anything to Mark. She was upset, but not surprised, when all of a sudden Linda got so terribly sick — something in her stomach; it was all very terrible and mysterious, and Hannah could never make head or tail out of Dr. Glazer's complicated explanation.

For a whole month it went on, Linda's illness, getting worse every day. But slowly, terribly slowly. And

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it was heart-breaking, the effect it was having on Mark — the dark circles under his eyes, showing how little sleep he was getting, the way his face kept growing paler and paler.

Then one night — it was after 11, and Hannah and Miss Pincus had just turned off the television — Mark suddenly showed up at the apartment. He was a little out of breath — he must have rushed all the way — and it took him a few minutes to bring out what he wanted to say. Dr. Glazer had finally told him the truth about Linda. Her condition was serious, very serious, but there was a chance, Dr. Glazer said. An operation was needed and a specialist, one particular man who was very well known. If that could be done right away, well, there was definitely a chance —

Mark was in two states of mind, Hannah saw. He was excited, even enthusiastic, because with his natural pessimism he had been telling himself for weeks that there was no chance at all. At the same time he was despondent; he paced up and down and waved his arms hopelessly. "An operation — a specialist! It'll cost a fortune, Aunt Hannah! How can I afford that kind of money? I could paint pictures for ten years and never be able to afford it!" He began to pound his fist into the palm of his hand. "Money! It's always money, isn't it? It ruins your life, it kills your spirit, it stands in the way of everything! Damn it, damn it — why did God have to invent money?"

Hannah put in softly that she had managed to save a little bit of money herself over the years — she had such modest tastes, and Papa's life insurance was really far too much for her. Miss Pincus, blushing all over, said that she too had a little bit saved up. But when the two ladies mentioned the exact amount of their little bits, they added up to such a very little that it just wasn't worth the trouble.

"There's only one thing to do, Aunt Hannah," Mark said. His mouth tightened as he said it. "I'll just have to go to Dad."

Hannah was silent. What could she say to the boy? She knew how hard it was for him, a boy with so much pride, to make a decision like that. And she knew Ben Wechsler, too. She knew Ben wouldn't miss the chance to make the most of this.

"I'll see him tomorrow morning," Mark said. "Why not? Why shouldn't I? My God, will he eat me up or something?" And he gave a laugh, a sharp little laugh that wasn't very mirthful. A second later he sighed a long tired sigh. "I don't know, Aunt Hannah, I just don't know what to think or anything. Maybe I've been wrong all this time. Wasting my life, dirtying up a lot of good canvas. Nothing to show for it, not one damn thing except Linda lying there in that bed, trying to keep me from noticing the pain she's in." He passed his hand over his eyes. "Maybe it's a punishment on me, this crazy nightmare — to teach me that I can't be a baby all my life, that a grown man has to face up to his responsibili-

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ties. I don't know — I don't care — I only want her to be all right —"

Quietly but firmly Hannah told him that he certainly wasn't being a baby, that he had been facing up to greater responsibilities than most young men *ever* had to face.

He cut her off by giving her a hug. "Good old Aunt Hannah," he said. "My one-woman cheering section, publicity agent, guardian angel, and psychoanalyst. God knows what I'd ever do without you." He smiled at her for a moment, and then he turned away. "I'll go now," he said very quietly, "if I'm going to see Dad in the morning."

He left the apartment, and Hannah and Miss Pincus spent the next two hours in the deepest conversation.

And the next day in suspense. For every minute, all through the afternoon, they expected the phone to ring, a knock on the door, some news of Mark's interview with Ben. Every time the phone did ring, they both jumped as if it had been a gunshot. But it was always the butcher or the grocer or one of the members of Hannah's Recipe Club. And it wasn't till early evening, just before Hannah and Miss Pincus sat down to dinner, that they heard.

The moment Hannah set eyes on Mark, she knew what he was going to say. His face was simply dead white; she had never seen such a hard, *inward* sort of look in his eyes; and his voice was very quiet, very calm. Almost casual — that, indeed, was the most awful thing about him!

"He refused me. He said no. He wouldn't even take me seriously. I've always exaggerated things, he said. He was on his way to the train — he's got business over the weekend — and he said he couldn't waste time on a lot of hysterical trifles."

"It was a mistake," Hannah said, feeling foolish even as she said it. "A misunderstanding, dear. When he gets back —"

"No misunderstanding." Mark gave a slow shake of his head. " 'You wanted to waste your time with that painting foolishness,' he said. 'You wanted to throw away your life on that gold-digger,' he said. 'Now you're up against a little trouble, you come crawling back to me. You made your bed,' he said, 'now you can lie on it.' " Mark raised his head, and for a moment there was a look of almost childish wonder in his eyes. "He was smiling when he said it, Aunt Hannah. Smiling just as friendly as could be."

Then the childish look disappeared; and while his voice remained quiet and calm, as before, Hannah could see his fists tighten until the knuckles were white. "If anything happens to Linda," he said, "I'll kill him. I'll kill him, Aunt Hannah. I give you my solemn promise."

Hannah stared at him in horror. A little cry rose to her throat, but it stuck there. By the time she recovered her voice, Mark was gone.

A moment later she felt Miss Pincus lightly plucking her sleeve. "He's all upset, Hannah dear. He's really

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the sweetest boy in the world. He wouldn't really think of —"

"Then you feel it, too?" Hannah turned slowly and looked hard into Miss Pincus's red little face. "He means it, doesn't he?" She was surprised at how matter-of-fact, almost indifferent, she sounded. "He really and truly means it."

It was just impossible to eat her dinner that night. She had to do something, she had to do something — so she kept telling herself all night. She had to talk to Ben, get down on her knees to him, make him change his mind before it was too late! But Ben was away for the weekend. How could she ever get through the weekend?

She got through the weekend somehow. She called up Elsie every day to find out if Ben was back yet.

When he finally did get back, she was up to see him at his office like a wink.

He was as cheerful and good-humored as ever. She hadn't got three words out of her mouth before he was shaking his head and chuckling. "Nice type son I've got," he said. "He gets his female relatives to do his dirty work for him." And Ben's answer to her request was no, of course. The most genial, pleasant, good-natured no in the world. So finally, when she couldn't think of any more arguments, Hannah just had to get up and leave.

Maybe it'll be all right, she kept telling herself all the way home. Dr. Glazer could be mistaken too, God knows. Those doctors, they always go out of their way to look at the gloomy side of things!

Next morning Hannah went shopping. And at lunchtime, when she got back to the apartment, Miss Pincus was waiting for her, breathless and red-eyed, as if she had just been crying. "Oh, Hannah dear! Your nephew's doctor just phoned . . . It's Linda — that sweet little girl — she passed away an hour ago!"

For the first few minutes Hannah was stunned. Miss Pincus actually had to help her to a chair. Then, as the shock wore off, the full horror of the situation came over her. "I have to talk to him!" she cried. "I have to see him, comfort him, take care of him until he can take care of himself again!" With fumbling fingers she dialed Mark's number. A sharp beep-beep sounded in her ears. The line was busy.

She put down the receiver and began to walk the floor. Up and down she walked, squeezing her hands together, talking away in quick nervous spurts to Miss Pincus. "Time!" she said. "Our biggest problem is time. A boy like Mark . . . Deep down he's kind and gentle as a baby. Deep down he wouldn't hurt a fly. But he has that terrible, uncontrollable temper that takes hold of him. It makes a different boy out of him. It whips him up to saying things and doing things he doesn't really mean at all. Like a fever it is, a raging fever that goes higher and higher, until it breaks!"

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"But it never lasts long, Hannah dear," said Miss Pincus. "He's not the type that holds a grudge. A day or so at most —"

"A day or so is enough! A *minute* or so might be enough for the rest of his life!" Hannah broke off with a shudder. When she went on talking again, her voice was calmer. "We can't let him do it. No, no, we can't. A terrible thing like that — he'll ruin his whole life, all his chances, all his prospects . . . Such a brilliant, talented boy! And there's Ben, too. Poor Ben . . . I never would've thought that some day I'd be saying 'poor Ben.' Whatever he's done, he doesn't deserve . . . And Mark believes that, too! That's the worst of it! Nobody will believe that more strongly than Mark himself — after the whole thing is over —" Hannah clenched her fists. "We have to save the boy, that's all there is to it! We have to save him from himself! What's he planning? What's going on in his head? How does he mean to do it? We have to find these things out and make him stop — and God only knows how much time we have!"

"But Hannah," said Miss Pincus, looking very forlorn, "how can we find out when we just don't know anything about it at all?"

Hannah stopped pacing and lifted her chin — and really, though she was ordinarily a rather small unobtrusive person, she suddenly felt quite tall and majestic. "Because I know that boy, that's how! All these years that he's been coming to me, asking my advice about things, telling me things he wouldn't ever tell anybody else . . . Sometimes it's been almost as if I could see his mind working, as if I could predict ahead of time what he was thinking, what he was going to do. Well — well — if I could do it in the past, I don't see why I shouldn't be able to do it just as easily right now!" And then, in spite of herself, her voice quavered a little and she reached out for Miss Pincus's hand. "I'm so frightened — yes, I am — but I've simply got to do it."

But this sort of nonsense wasn't getting her anywhere. Time, that was her problem. It was plain stupid to waste precious minutes indulging her own emotions. So once again she dialed Mark's number, and this time there was an answer.

It was a strange man's voice that answered, very soft and refined, and a little too soothing. He explained that he was from the undertaker's, and when Hannah asked for Mark he gave a small sad sigh and said, "The poor young man was most upset. He made no outward show of it. But one could see it, one has experience of these things. He was most upset — and so he left."

"Left? Where? Where did he go?"

"To the home of his parents. Most natural, under the circumstances —"

Hannah hung up abruptly. "He's there already!" she cried. "And there's only one possible reason! Oh, I hope we're not too late!" Then she pounced on the phone and dialed her sister Elsie's number.

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Elsie answered, full of gulps and sniffles over "this terrible tragedy." "Oh yes, Mark is here," she said. "Poor boy, you can imagine what he's going through. Still you know," an odd little note of satisfaction crept into Elsie's voice, "it may be all for the good in a way. Because a wonderful thing has happened, Hannah dear —"

Hannah perked up her ears. "What wonderful thing?"

"Mark and Ben have made up their quarrel!" Elsie couldn't keep the joy out of her voice. "Mark has apologized to Ben — he says that Linda's death has brought him to his senses. And he wants to come home and live with us again! Oh Hannah, I'm so happy! That is, I'm very sad, of course . . . this terrible tragedy . . . but we have to be brave, don't we? And after all, where else should Mark be brave except with his own mother and father?"

"Where else?" Hannah said, her agitation growing. That Mark should *apologize* to Ben at a time like this! She was right, she was right — something terrible *was* going through his head!

"— the comforting influence of your own loved ones," Elsie was saying. "That's why we're going away from New York for a few days."

Hannah gave a start. "Going away?"

"Yes, we're going up to Connecticut." Ben had a beautiful big summer house, on the Sound near Westport. "Tomorrow morning we're going, right after the funeral. Poor Mark should get out of the city. All the noise and excitement, and the painful memories. And that fresh country air does wonders, of course."

"Is Ben going with you, too?"

"Of course he is, Hannah. Mark absolutely insisted on it."

"*Mark* insisted on it?"

"Oh, yes. It was Mark who suggested that we go up to the country in the first place. But he said he wouldn't do it if Ben didn't come along. You know, they're really very fond of each other, Hannah. It's only that Mark is always doing things to upset poor Ben. Now that he's being so sweet and cooperative —"

In an instant Hannah made her decision. "I'm going up to Connecticut with you," she said. "I'll bring my suitcase along to the cemetery."

"But Hannah —"

"I need that fresh country air my self! Now goodbye."

The moment she was off the phone, Hannah began to pace again.

"After the funeral!" she said, thinking out loud. "Of course. I should have realized that's how he'd feel about it. He'll go through the funeral, he'll pay his last respects to poor Linda, and then he'll feel free to — to —"

"But Hannah, if that's true," Miss Pincus's voice had a shiver in it, "then you just can't possibly stop him! Because as soon as the funeral is over — right then and there at the cemetery — he might take a gun or something out of his pocket —"

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"I don't think so." Hannah shook her head thoughtfully. "Somehow I think he'll prefer to wait until Ben and he are alone. You see, he doesn't really want to get arrested or anything like that. He's young. It'll seem like a better revenge to him if he gets away with it. Yes, he'll wait until Ben and he are alone, and then he'll try to make it look like an accident or something — and of course, he'll make a dreadful mess out of it! He doesn't really have the mind for that sort of thing — his talents are creative rather than practical. They'll see right away that he's guilty.

"Besides," she shook off the tremor that had crept into her voice, "he's got some sort of a plan in his head already. Why else would he suggest going up to the country with Ben at a time like this? Believe me, believe me — up in the country, he somehow expects to find the opportunity . . . But *what* opportunity?"

Miss Pincus shook her head.

"I'll find out," Hannah said, quiet and firm. "Starting tomorrow, when I drive up to the country with him, I'll watch him every minute. I'll never take my eyes off him. I won't even go to sleep at night. And I'll imagine to myself that I'm him, with his thoughts and his feelings. Who knows? Maybe I'll just happen to hit on the same idea that *he* did!"

The funeral was very early the next morning. Still, Hannah was up an hour too soon, with her suitcase packed.

There was some discussion over breakfast as to whether Miss Pincus should go to the funeral, too. Miss Pincus wanted to go, because she had really been fond of poor Linda, but she felt a little bashful about intruding on what was really a family occasion. In the end, her bashfulness won out, as it usually did, and she said goodbye to Hannah at the door.

"And good luck," Miss Pincus added, in the softest little murmur. Hannah pressed her hand in gratitude and left the apartment.

As soon as she set eyes on Mark, sitting between his mother and father in the front row of the synagogue, she knew that her fears had been justified. He was looking so sombre in his black suit. His lips were white, and he was pressing them tightly together. His eyes were dry. Not a single trace of a tear. Yes, the fever was definitely on him.

"Mark darling," she said, going up to him just before the ceremony began. "How can I tell you what I feel? She was almost like a daughter to me —"

He answered her briefly and politely. But he didn't meet her eye. And when she kissed him gently on the cheek, he didn't return the kiss.

Then came the funeral, cruel and bitter, as those things always are. Hannah was glad when it was over and they all got into Ben's car.

The drive up to Connecticut was long and strained. Elsie sniffled and occasionally daubed her eyes with a handkerchief, just to remind every-

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body how she was taking the "terrible tragedy." Ben puffed on his cigar — his genial smile was subdued for the occasion, but Hannah could see it lurking at the corners of his mouth.

Mark sat up straight and stiff and never said a word.

Hannah was sitting up front next to Arthur, the Wechsler's chauffeur. Maybe, if she questioned Arthur cleverly enough, she could get from him some clue as to what was on Mark's mind. Maybe, without knowing it, Arthur could tell her just what there was up in the country that Mark hoped to make use of — for his scheme.

For a while she talked to Arthur about the weather. Then she allowed the conversation to slip into more intimate subjects. She asked Arthur how he was doing at night school — he was studying to be a mechanic. She asked about his wife's health. She heard all about his little boy's report card. And pretty soon, what with one idle remark and another, all in a low voice, so they couldn't hear her in back, she began to gather information about their life up in the country — and especially what Ben did all day, whom he saw, how often he was by himself. But it seemed as if Ben's life in the country was quite as normal, public, and safe as his life in the city. She couldn't imagine why Mark should have felt it necessary to go all the way up to Connecticut . . . And then, all of a sudden, one offhand remark of hers brought results.

"The country is lovely, of course," she said, "but you know, Arthur, sometimes it can be dangerous, too. I mean, you're always reading stories in the papers about accidents and drownings and so on —"

The shot struck home. Hannah could see it right away by the solemn, eager look that came over Arthur's face. It took him just a few minutes to tell her the whole story of the latest excitement up in Westport. In the last few months there had been a string of robberies in Ben's neighborhood. Several houses had been broken into, and people had even been held up on the road at night. "And sure enough, Ma'am, somebody's going to get themselves killed one of these days!"

With difficulty Hannah managed to hide her trembling. Fortunately, Arthur was so enthusiastic about his subject that he went right on talking. "Those robbers won't do no robbing around Mr. Wechsler's place, though. Because we've got protection. We've got a gun up there, all ready for them. "Just a little gun, but it'll do the work all right. It's in the kitchen cupboard."

Hannah made her voice more casual than ever. "And the whole family knows where it is, I suppose? I mean — Mark knows, I suppose."

"I guess he does, ma'am. He was up there the summer Mr. Wechsler bought it. That was the summer there was all that fuss about Mr. Mark marrying poor Miss Linda —"

Arthur chattered on, but Hannah became lost in thought. The general outline of Mark's scheme was clear to

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her now. The more she thought about it the more convinced she was. It was most certainly his intention to take advantage of those mysterious robberies. Everybody was expecting something violent to happen in the neighborhood, anyway. And if it happened with Ben's own gun — well, it would simply look as if Ben had been trying to defend himself against the robbers.

This was the general outline, but as to the specific details, Hannah knew that she still had a great deal of hard, desperate thinking ahead of her. Where did Mark plan to stage this dreadful scene? When? Under what circumstances?

There was one practical step she could take just as soon as they arrived at Ben's place. She could get hold of that gun from the cupboard and hide it away where Mark would never find it. If he was planning to use the gun, and if it was missing when he went to get it — well, that would delay him, wouldn't it? He'd have to change his plans, wait for a later opportunity, choose a new weapon — and time would pass; a few more hours would be made secure. Maybe the fever would begin to subside —

But the chance to make away secretly with the gun didn't present itself as easily as Hannah had planned. The first two hours after their arrival, one annoying obstacle kept getting in her way — the cook, an old lady who lived in Connecticut all year round, was in the kitchen every minute. She was a sharp-eyed old lady, and there simply wasn't any way of slipping that gun out of the cupboard without attracting her attention.

So Hannah was forced to wait till after dinner, when the cook went off to her room. The rest of them went down to the beach — Ben's own private beach, with a bath-house and a dock and a beach umbrella — and relaxed in beach chairs and sipped highballs. Except for Mark, who either paced up and down or stood on the dock and stared out across the water, everybody was easy and comfortable. So Hannah decided it was now or never.

She excused herself and ambled up the lawn towards the house.

For a while she moved slowly and casually, as if there was no great hurry. But as soon as she was sure of being out of sight, she ran around to the back, saw through the screen door that the kitchen was empty, and made straight for the cupboard. Looking around her nervously all the time — because it would have been terribly embarrassing if somebody had caught her — she eased open the cupboard door and reached for the gun.

She didn't find it on the first shelf. She didn't find it on the second shelf, either. On the top shelf she was especially careful, poking and fiddling around for almost a whole minute. Then, her fingers beginning to shake a little, she looked through both the lower shelves all over again. Finally, with a surge of panic, she had to recognize the truth. Somebody had been there before her!

Quickly Hannah left the kitchen

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and ran around the house and down the lawn again. At the edge of the beach, she stopped short with a little gasp of horror.

"Where's Ben?" she cried to Elsie, who was reading a magazine. "Where did he go?"

"Oh, he went for his walk," Elsie said. "He always takes his evening stroll around this time. He really has a great fondness for nature, you know. And it's so pleasant, the road through the woods —"

"And where's Mark?" Hannah said.

"Mark?" Elsie sat up and blinked around. "Well, *that's* funny," she said. "He was right here a minute ago."

While Elsie was still blinking, Hannah started up the lawn and made for the road as fast as she could. It was a wide dirt road full of windings and twistings, and on either side were sturdy old trees, bushes in funny shapes, and wildflowers darting among them. Hannah had always loved the walk along this road just at this time of the evening, when the stars were beginning to glitter. How many times had she made this walk, with Mark at her side laughing at her funny stories or gravely telling her his plans for the future!

But she hardly noticed any of the old landmarks now. She just went running along, breathing hard, trying not to lose her energy.

And then, when she thought she really couldn't go another step, she made a sharp turn and came suddenly upon Mark.

He was standing by the side of the road, and his back was to her. The way he was standing, so still and sort of poised, it stunned Hannah for a moment, and she didn't say anything. He seemed to feel her eyes on him and turned around quickly. For a split second there was a flash of anger on his face. Then he smiled — a tight, strained smile, trying awfully hard to be natural.

"Aunt Hannah, what are you doing here?"

"I was taking a little walk," she said, and she felt that her fast breathing accused her every moment of being a liar. "How nice to bump into you, Mark."

"Yes. Very nice." He couldn't keep from sneaking a glance up the road.

Knowing what he was waiting for, Hannah forced herself to speak up, fast and enthusiastically. "It's lovely up here, isn't it, Mark? We always liked it up here, didn't we?"

"Yes. We always did."

Hannah's tone became graver. "It's a place to forget your troubles, dear. Difficult as it seems, eventually we all forget our troubles."

He shifted on his feet. "Sure, sure. I've got a good idea how to handle my troubles."

"Do you, dear?" Hannah took a step toward him and spoke a little more urgently. "I wish you'd tell me about it, your idea. You always have in the past, you know."

"Nothing to tell." He carefully

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avoided her gaze. "These things happen to everybody. Why talk about it?"

"Sometimes it's a good idea to talk about what's on your mind," she said. "Sometimes there are things you think of — things you want to do — only you just can't see them very clearly yourself. So you talk about them to somebody else, Mark dear, and all of a sudden they look quite different. And maybe you've even saved yourself from making a terrible mistake."

He shrugged. "Maybe so. Who knows?"

She leaned forward, very solemn now. "We've only got one life, Mark dear. And sometimes when we're young, young and foolish — you don't mind the expression? — we could rush ahead and do a thing that would be just like taking our one precious life and throwing it away forever. What I mean is, when we're young we're on the brink, Mark dear. On the brink of a cliff, so to speak. And it's so easy to take that one little step and go over — and so impossible to ever step back again."

She could see him stiffen, but he didn't say a word.

"I mean, there are terrible people in the world," Hannah went on. "I'm not so old-fashioned that I don't know about the terrible people in the world. But just because they're terrible, just because we hate them, we can't just go ahead and treat them as if they weren't *people!* Because that makes us just as bad as they are. And instead of hating *them*, we'll end up hating ourselves."

She glanced up at him uncertainly, but his face told her nothing. And still he wouldn't speak.

"Yes, it's hard," she said. "Oh, I know how hard it is — when you're young, and you're angry, and you just want to do something about it! *Anything* about it! And you *can* do something, Mark. You can do it the right way . . . It's much, much harder, and it looks like those terrible people have got an unfair advantage, but in the end it's the best," and she reached out and squeezed his hand hard, as if she hoped to squeeze the truth right into him, "believe me, believe me — it's really and truly the best!"

And now she was more out of breath than ever. So she came to a stop and waited anxiously for his answer.

After a moment, he lifted his chin and looked her in the eye, straight and steady. "Aunt Hannah," he said, "I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

There was a dull, sinking feeling in her heart. But she was all out of arguments, she couldn't make a sound.

Mark removed his hand from hers and turned his head away. "Now if you don't mind, I came out here to be alone."

The coldness of his tone made her flush deeply. Never before, never once in all these years, had he talked to her like that. It's beginning already, she thought. He hasn't even done it yet, he's only *waiting* to do it, and already

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he's beginning to change! Then she saw him give another of those anxious side-glances up the road, so she spoke up quickly. "Mark dear, if you'd only —"

"Mind your own business, Aunt Hannah!" he snapped out, with a look on his face that he hadn't ever turned on her before. "Go back to the house, for God's sake, and stop being such a nosy old maid!"

For a moment she stared at him. And then she felt something that she never would have thought herself capable of feeling. She felt *angry* at him — overwhelmingly, uncontrollably angry! "All right, all right!" she cried. "Do what you want to do! I don't care any more! Everybody says that young people should express themselves these days! All right, express yourself! Get it out of your system! Ruin your whole life! It just doesn't matter to me!"

Trembling all over, she took a few steps down the road — and stopped short a moment later, as she heard a loud cheerful shout from the distance. "Hello, up there!" It was Ben, coming briskly around the turn, smiling and waving his cigar.

Hannah stood where she was, watching Mark. She saw him hesitate a moment. Then, with a little gasp, he turned and stamped away towards the house.

He was out of sight by the time Ben got to Hannah. "Anti-social," Ben said, taking a puff from his cigar. "Sometimes I think that kid hates people." With great satisfaction he blew out a large, curling smoke-ring.

But Hannah scarcely heard him. She was still trembling a little, from pain at the things Mark had said to her, and from panic at the things she had said to him. Nevertheless, she had meant them sincerely, every word. She *didn't* care what happened to him! These last twenty-four hours, they were already beginning to wear her out. She wasn't a young woman any more, and the strain was just too great for her. And it wasn't worth it, either! Who was she sacrificing herself for, anyway? A brother-in-law who had always patronized her and condescended to her as if she were some sort of a comic old-maid out of the movies, and a nephew who used to care for her but didn't care for anybody any more, not even for himself! As far as she was concerned, Mark could do what he pleased, and his fever could simply run its course!

And it *would* run its course too — she realized that as soon as she got back to the beach with Ben. The scene on the road definitely hadn't been the end of it. Because Mark simply couldn't keep still. He kept moving from the dock to the beach, flopping into a chair, getting up again immediately. And drinking! He must have gulped down three highballs in the short time they remained outside. He'll try again, Hannah told herself — the next time he can get Ben alone. And he'll try even harder than ever! Just because he failed the first time, just because he couldn't do it on the road. It's burning away inside of him,

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burning away hotter and more fiercely the more he tries to hold it back! It won't be long now before it comes roaring out —

"— early-morning sunshine," Ben was saying. "Nothing like it for the health. So be sure to remind me, Elsie. I'm setting my alarm clock for 6 tomorrow morning. I'm coming down here to the beach and taking a good long snooze in the morning sun."

"Six in the morning!" Elsie cried. "But *that* can't be good for you!"

Hannah wasn't looking at her. She was looking at the expression on Mark's face . . . the glitter in his eyes as he fixed them on Ben, the slight smile that twitched his lips as Ben finished talking.

Hannah knew what was going through Mark's mind as clearly as if he had spoken it out loud. Her first impulse was to speak up quickly, "That sounds like a wonderful idea, Ben dear. I think I'll join you. I think I'll get up at 6 o'clock too."

But she stopped herself, she didn't say a word. What do I care? she reminded herself. What's it got to do with me?

And yet, she just couldn't seem to get to sleep that night. For a while she tossed in her bed, but she only succeeded in mussing the covers. For a while she sat by the window and endlessly re-read the first chapter of her latest Book-of-the-Month. At last — way past midnight, when the rest of the house was asleep — she shut up her book with a sigh. Yes, she *did* care what happened to him — she had to admit it, she had to face it. No matter how difficult he might get, or how many dreadful names he might call her, he was still her favorite nephew — more than a nephew, much, much more, and she just couldn't get away from that. No matter how much he hurt her, she knew that she would have to be down at the beach at 6 o'clock, she would have to stop him from carrying out his terrible scheme.

But still she couldn't sleep. So she forced herself through the rest of her book, until the clock on her dresser said 5. Then she dressed herself, opened her door very, very carefully, and tiptoed out to the hall. She tiptoed past the door of Mark's room, and past the door of Elsie's room, hardly daring to breathe for fear of attracting their attention.

Ten minutes later she emerged from the house.

The beach was really quite a distance, and her walk down the lawn seemed to take hours. And then, at the edge of the beach, she was held for a moment by the sad gray spectacle of the empty beach chairs and the deserted dock and the softly lapping water. A little pang of despair rose in her heart. What's the good of all this? she thought. It's doomed to failure from the start! But she threw off this ridiculous mood a moment later with a brisk shake of her head and stepped onto the beach.

The best place to hide, she decided a few minutes later, was the bath house. It wasn't too far away, and through

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the keyhole she would have a perfect view of the big beach umbrella under which Ben always stretched out and took his morning snooze. Just to make sure, she popped into the bath house now and looked through the keyhole. Sure enough, there in plain sight was the umbrella stuck in the sand, and she could see Ben's pillow and blanket in front of it. Yes, I'll hide here, Hannah told herself. And then, when Mark arrives, I can open the door and appear before him suddenly. That way, I'll have the advantage of surprise — such a tremendous, incalculable advantage in a delicate situation like this!

But there wasn't really any more time for thinking. The sun was very bright now, and her watch said a quarter to 6. Quickly she scurried into the bath house and closed the door. Then she pulled up a small stool and stationed herself at the keyhole.

For what happened next, Hannah was never able to forgive herself. "But Hannah dear," Miss Pincus told her afterwards, "what you did was only human." "Human!" Hannah answered her. "Stupid, that's what it is! Nothing at all but stupid!" Because the truth is, Hannah began to feel drowsy. The sleep she had missed during the night began to steal up on her. First she had trouble keeping her eyes open. And then she said to herself, Well, I'll close them for a moment or two. What's the harm in it, anyway? Just a moment or two . . .

With a little start, she realized that footsteps were coming from the beach. Instinctively, with the drowsiness hardly out of her eyes yet, she looked at her watch. Six fifteen — it was 6:15. With a gasp, Hannah pushed her eye up to the keyhole again . . .

She saw the beach umbrella, just where it had been before. And underneath it was Ben's figure — that heavy figure entirely covered by the blanket and the pillow.

And standing over the quiet figure, looking down at it without moving a muscle, was Mark!

Hannah couldn't move, couldn't cry out, no matter how much she might have wanted to. All she could do was stare through the keyhole as if she were frozen to it. She saw Mark wet his lips — well, at least he's nervous, she thought; at least that's something to be said for him. She saw a look come over his face, a look that she hoped she could forget some day. And then out of his pocket he took the gun. Such a small, helpless-looking gun!

He pointed the gun. His hand was trembling at first. But it stopped trembling, and he squeezed the trigger. The shot was sort of hollow and muffled, and Hannah could remember wondering to herself, Is *that* all there is to it!

And still she couldn't move.

The shot died away. And then Mark squeezed the trigger again, and again, and again after that — he squeezed it and squeezed it, until there were no more bullets left in the gun. And even after that, for a few times more, Hannah heard the click-

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click of the trigger in the silence.

And then, as quickly as it had happened, it was over. He blinked down at his gun, and seemed to realize for the first time that it was empty. With a convulsive gesture he threw it away from him. It landed in the sand with a soft thud. And in a high unsteady voice he cried out at the form at his feet, "How do *you* like it? Tell me, tell me — how do *you* like it?"

And now, at last, Hannah was able to move. She pushed open the bathhouse door, took a few steps forward, and spoke softly. "Mark dear. My poor, poor dear."

He whirled, a wild look on his face, and practically screamed out her name. "Aunt Hannah!"

"Oh my darling," she said, her voice still hardly above a whisper, "do you *know* what you've done?"

Mark stared at her a moment longer. Then he turned slowly and stared down at the blanket near his feet. "Aunt Hannah," he said, in a voice that sounded almost casual, "I've killed him. And myself too. Aunt Hannah, it's the end of everything for me."

She nodded her head solemnly. "It is. The end of everything."

He laughed, a queer tight little laugh. "When we're young and foolish," he said. "You told me so, didn't you? And I wouldn't even listen to you. And now — I think I'd give anything if he was only alive again."

This was what Hannah had been waiting to hear. She couldn't hold back her smile any longer. "Would you give me a kiss?" she said warmly.

He looked up at her, bewildered.

Without another word, she reached down to the sand and pulled away Ben's blanket, exposing the row of pillows which she had carefully arranged underneath it. "You remember, Mark, what I told you in the woods last night? I told you to go ahead, to express yourself, to get this thing out of your system? I hated myself later on for saying such a thing to you. What an old fool I was! And then I began to think it over. Maybe I wasn't such an old fool after all. Maybe this was really the only way. Not to stand in your way, not to hold you back, not to make you all the more tense and frustrated and full of violence. But to let you go right ahead with your plans, to fan the fever and force it up higher and higher, and make it break just as soon as possible. So this morning," and Hannah couldn't help laughing a little at the thought of it, "I simply sneaked into your father's room and turned off his alarm clock. Then I came down here to the beach, and revived an old trick which was always of great value to your mother and me when we were small girls and wanted the grown-ups to think we were in bed asleep. And a very artistic job I made of it, too — don't you agree with me?"

All through this speech Mark had been standing there, staring down at the pillows and the blanket. And now, in an instant, all the wildness, all the anguish, seemed to go out of him to-

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gether. His shoulders sagged, his arms dropped to his sides, softly and quietly he began to sob. "I was crazy," he said. "It was Linda, Aunt Hannah. It was thinking about her, the way she looked. Just lying there. I was crazy —"

Hannah was by his side quickly, taking hold of his hands, looking up into his face. "It's all right, it's all right," she said. "Who isn't a little crazy in this modern world of ours?"

His arms were around her now, he was crying on her shoulder the way he used to do such a long time ago. "My God, Aunt Hannah, my God, how can I ever thank you?"

"No thank-you's, no thank-you's," Hannah said. "Believe me, it was my pleasure."

A few seconds later Mark recovered himself.

He was a little embarrassed by his tears, so Hannah let go of him and began discreetly to gather up the pillows, the blanket, and the rest of the mess on the beach. She stowed it away in the bath-house laundry hamper, and by that time Mark wasn't so embarrassed any more. "Let's get out of here, Aunt Hannah," he said. "For God's sake, let's get ourselves a cup of coffee!"

So he took her by the arm, and they walked back to the house together. And while she fixed his coffee, Hannah told him all about this last hectic day, and her efforts to find out his secret, and he smiled a little ruefully and called her "Miss Sherlock Holmes." Then Ben appeared, very annoyed at "the inferior brand of alarm clocks they sell you nowadays!" And Mark and Hannah exchanged a little smile.

Not that Mark was suddenly calm and untroubled, of course. How could he be, after everything that had happened to him, and with Linda's death so close to him still? The saddest time of all was ahead of him, the time of mourning for his dead, and of learning to live without her. But this time would pass, Hannah knew. It would pass as the fever had passed, and before long he'd be thinking about the future again, and talking about the wonderful pictures he was going to paint.

That afternoon, over long distance, Hannah told Miss Pincus the news. Miss Pincus was thrilled and horrified all the way through. She gasped whenever Hannah was on the brink of failure, sighed with relief as soon as Hannah was successful again, clucked her tongue or uttered little squeals of dismay at every reference to such matters as murder and revenge. In short, she listened to the whole story with the greatest relish and delight.

Once, however — only once — she did break out with a cry of positive, unaffected indignation. That was when Hannah got to the part about Mark calling her "a nosy old maid."

"Oh, Hannah dear!" Miss Pincus wailed.

"How could he ever say such a thing? How *could* he? Oh, the poor hysterical boy! Thank Heavens you've brought him to his senses!"

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What is the greatest editorial thrill that can come to an editor? Well, it is hard to say . . .

Surely the discovery of a new talent is hard to beat. The editor can't help wondering how far the new writer will eventually go, and to what extent the editor's encouragement and help have been determining factors. Nor can the editor help wondering if it were not for his or her perception and enthusiasm, would the new writer have been held back, perhaps for years, and would this frustrating delay have possibly discouraged the new writer, even caused him to fall by the wayside . . .

Then there is the discovery of a "lost" story — an unknown gem, say, by a celebrated writer, or a buried treasure by a completely unheard-of author, or a story that has been neglected by the critics and deserves to be rescued from biblivion . . .

Then, of course, the arrival on an editor's desk of a manuscript that proves to be a really fine story — that is always *a top thrill, whether the author is someone famous throughout the world or someone who has never seen his name in print. A really first-rate story is like a work of art — "a thing of beauty is a joy forever . . . it will never pass into nothingness."*

But perhaps there is an editorial thrill even greater than any of these. For example, when we discovered and brought to you Earl Derr Biggers's "The Ebony Stick," and told you that it was the "one and only crime short story written by the creator of Charlie Chan," that was a thrill almost beyond compare; but when we found out that "The Ebony Stick" was not *Earl Derr Biggers's only crime short, that there was another called "The Apron of Genius," then the original thrill had definitely been surpassed.*

Yes, perhaps the greatest of all editorial thrills is the thrill that comes to an editor when he learns that he has been wrong!

THE APRON OF GENIUS

by EARL DERR BIGGERS

TO THOSE WHO HAD FOUND, UNDER the crashing elevated, Paris transplanted in the shape of the Café Côte d'Or, the place was more than a fad, it was a religion. Reverently they applied themselves to the Elysian-like dishes borne to them from that land of pleasant odors — the kitchen;

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softly, in low, serious tones, they conversed with Monsieur Casserole, the proprietor, who hovered over them with thin hands clasped and the hope that all was well. Scornfully, rightly indignant that mercenary matters should have their place in a dinner at the Côte d'Or, they laid the amount of their score on the counter in front of Madame Casserole, who sat there in her little cage year after year, smiling benignantly upon all over her encored chin. Ah, what a café was that!

What a café for those who had youth and hope and imagination! To it came all the clan who, had there been such a land as the magazine writers' Bohemia, would have dwelt therein. Those who painted, those who wrote, those who were inspired to see the beauty of life and to recognize a master in a cook as well as in a poet — such were they who had found out the Côte d'Or and had made it their gastronomical shrine. For the Café Côte d'Or was not, first of all, a place to eat; it was rather a quiet nook where, over an incidental cordial, one might dream oneself back across the sea and under the sidewalk awnings of the gay city, in the shade of the absinthe frappé.

Into the sacred precincts of the Côte d'Or one night a stranger roamed, and Monsieur Casserole will tell you that he sipped delightedly his wine, and lingered, loath to go, over the delicious omelet soufflé. Then with a nod he summoned the proprietor, and spoke most pompously.

"This omelet," said the stranger indicating an empty dish, "has pleased me more than I can say. I am most anxious to go into your kitchen and in person thank the master of cookery who made it."

Sacré bleu! what a wild indignity to propose. To suggest thus calmly a journey the great of the earth might well have taken with trepidation; to imagine thus coolly the interruption of Adolphe in his own stronghold; to risk thus ruthlessly the destruction of another omelet such as this just eaten. And for what, pray? For the paltry excuse of saying to him whose cookery had brought an emperor's smile: "For your omelet I thank you." *Mon Dieu!* Monsieur Casserole, usually so polite, stiffened almost rudely as he informed his unknown guest:

"What Monsieur suggests is quite impossible."

And so it was. Had he so willed, the stranger might have waited in the gutter until the lights were out and the simmering bouillabaisse was chilled, and seen Adolphe fare grandly forth to his Harlem flat, much as one watches before the hotel for Madame the opera singer to walk to her automobile. But to brazenly demand an audience behind the scenes of the theater of cookery! And a stranger! *Parbleu!* what presumption.

There had been those who had been granted such audiences, but it had not been after they had stated boldly their desire. One did not become openly a candidate. One only waited in silence, as one might live on await-

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ing an election to the Academy. If one was worthy — *eh bien*, one were there. If not, so be it.

The number of the worthy was five, and all of these, long before the honor had sought them out, had known the master by his works, had worshiped from afar, and had sent, now and again, by the dignity of Monsieur Casserole, words of adoration and fealty. There was Dupree, who had dreamed of seeing his paintings in the Salon, but who saw them only as stirring scenes for a Third Avenue melodrama; also little Margaret Gates, who wrote for the magazines, only most of them didn't know it yet, and whom Dupree would have married had she not already been married to her Art, as well as unfortunately possessed of a chin that would not allow her to sue for divorce, even in the hungry days when she might easily have obtained it on the ground of nonsupport. And there was Masters, the lean medical student, who dreamed of feats of surgery, carving cadavers by day and the côtelettes of the Côte d'Or by night, and Hargrave, hack of hacks, who ground out jokes — clipped them from Western newspapers, his enemies said — for comic operas that brought other men fame. And lastly Betty Martin — those who follow the society column in one of the big dailies have seen that name, not in the list of those present, but as the signature at the bottom of the story. Such was the roll of the privileged.

Such was the roster of the five who, dining together late one evening in the Café Côte d'Or, all unsuspecting of the honor that was about to fall upon them, were approached by Monsieur Casserole, after he had made many trips to the kitchen and had held a whispered conference with Madame, and told to prepare for a meeting with the power behind the omelets, and who had followed, suddenly sobered, and tremulous, as those who wait in the anteroom of a prince, into the realm behind the swinging doors — the kingdom of a prince, in sooth — of Adolphe the great, who towered so far above the glorious profession of cookery's lesser fry.

In the narrow passageway leading to Adolphe's region the little Gates girl giggled nervously, whereupon Dupree put his hand over her mouth, and it was thus, with irreverent mirth effectually strangled, and the proper awe in the ascendency, that the five honored ones came finally into the presence of the cook who had sent them daily for months beautiful evidence of his ability to fulfill the glowing promise of the Côte d'Or's card.

Adolphe stood in the center of his kitchen, massive, bald even below his snowy cap, the red of his face the oasis of color in an otherwise white desert, in one hand a monster fork they would always remember, those five. So he stood, this knight of the pans, his cherubic face undecided between a smile and a frown as the proper badge of greatness, but leaning

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slightly toward the latter — in the midst of the tools of his trade, in the center of his marvelous kitchen — ah, that kitchen!

Afterward the five who had been admitted compared notes, and it seemed, strangely enough, that each had brought away from Adolphe's workshop one impression that overshadowed all the others — thus, one remembered, before all, the great windows, through which there blew, from an unlooked-for courtyard without, a breeze as fresh as though it came direct from the fields; another could talk only of how the pots and pans glittered and shone like those in the advertisements; still another remembered most distinctly the whiteness of the floor. And the little Gates girl told how one and all of these things had seemed to her only as heralds proclaiming the greatness of him who was master there.

At last Adolphe spoke; soft, pleasing was his voice. Afterward they told one another that at sound of it they were reminded of the liquid smoothness of his bouillabaisse.

"You think I am great," he said, and they made no attempt to deny it; "you call me master of cooks, and not for one moment have you guessed the secret of my power. It lies here," and he lifted a fold of his spotless apron, while the five marveled, "here, in this, my apron. To you maybe, an apron, nothing else. To me — *parbleu!* all — what you say — divine fire! Twenty years ago he give it to me — he, my teacher, the great master, Bertrand de Bouillon himself, of Paris. From himself he took it, and to me it was given. Never am I without it. At night I carry it to my home, and Nanette *ma femme* makes it white for the morrow. As the painter or the sculptor has his model to furnish the pattern — ah, the inspiration — so to me is the apron of Bertrand de Bouillon. Without it — *morbleu!* that which I cook you would not eat. For my filets, my omelets, my escargots, thank not me. Think not of me. Of him only think — of Betrand de Bouillon, he of the far-off Paris, who made known to me the littlest thing I know; who gave me his apron that I might wear it to his glory, and that of France. *Ventrebleu!* what a man was that!"

It was a speech! Impromptu, it seemed, but none the less a speech, and when they had gazed their fill at the gift of the great Bertrand they pushed Dupree forward, and in a fashion born of the needs of the moment, he thanked Adolphe the snowy for this-confidence as to the apron of inspiration, assuring him of the understanding and sympathy of the other artist souls present, as well as hoping that over the Café Côte d'Or the star of luck might continue to shine. And then they bowed, each in turn, very solemnly, and on tiptoe returned to their table to talk.

They talked no more that night of Art, but the theme of their discourse was always this wonderful apron, this gift of Bertrand de Bouillon, the mighty chef of whom they had heard — Dupree, mind you, had tasted the

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de Bouillon salsifis in his gay student days — of de Bouillon himself, master spirit of a café in the gourmet's Mecca so beloved neither opera nor tale had mentioned it, because they who dined there were not the sort to make copy of their pleasure. They speculated on the texture of this bit of cloth apron which held the destiny of their precious café, and on the personality of the wife, Nanette, to whom it was intrusted each night, that she might restore it to whiteness while its wearer slept, gathering strength for the morrow's omelets. Dupree thought he had seen one like it somewhere, but they laughed him to scorn, and when Betty Martin claimed to have touched it while no one saw, they sneered at her, in the manner of townspeople too clever not to discount the boast of the traveler returned.

Would it wear out? Horrors! Would this apron wear out? Monsieur Casserole, hastily summoned from conference on the weather with another diner, brought reassurance in his smooth French way. It would not wear out. Like a board, so was it made. Always it would last — at least, so long as Adolphe lived. "Which, Heaven grant," added Monsieur Casserole, with an eye to business as well as to the welfare of his chef, "may be for many years yet to come."

"But," cried the little Gates girl, and the terror in her eyes was such that Dupree grasped her hand under shelter of the cloth, "the apron might be lost, and we may never find it."

The expressive face of Monsieur went quickly pale. His lip twitched. He threw up his hands.

"A merciful God forbid!" he cried; "for me and my café it would spell ruin. Ten years I have wined and dined the best of our people here under the elevated. Ten years Adolphe has worn that apron; ten years no one has had anything but praise for that which I have served. Lost? Maybe. Then the end of the Café Côte d'Or."

But the apron was not lost. The Café Côte d'Or pursued calmly its pleasant way of lightening hearts by charming palates; the diners still came; their satisfaction increased; and dreams were still the order of the night over the cordial and the coffee after the filets of Adolphe. All went smoothly enough to justify that never-clouded smile with which Madame bade the happy diner farewell. The months slipped by.

Then one night the door of the café opened, much as though it were admitting an artist or a poet, and a villain entered the Côte d'Or and the story.

He was a rascal, a Parisian ne'er-do-well; well had Monsieur Casserole known him, this Lefourbe, in the earlier days at home. Well also had he known his unsavory reputation. And for this reason Monsieur Casserole frowned when his countryman held out his hand.

"I, too, have sought this land so great," the newcomer said, "to find if there be a fortune for me also waiting here. You have done well, Antoine.

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Everything they tell me of the Côte d'Or. I have come to find what flavor it is in your food that has won the hearts and opened the purses of these busy people."

"So be it," Casserole replied, "it shall be our pleasure to serve you."

He spoke as kindly as he could, but later, when he saw the eyes of Lefourbe as they gazed on one of Adolphe's steaming dishes, his heart was hard, and he wished one might without dishonor deny an acquaintance who had not offended except by evil report.

Monsieur Lefourbe dined long, for even a rogue may understand an omelet, and dream a rogue's dream over an ancient wine. When he paused by Madame's cage, with the money Monsieur Casserole would on no account accept from an old acquaintance, he lifted his eyebrows ever so slightly.

"And Adolphe," he inquired, "he is still with you? And he still clings to his superstition — oh, so foolish — of the apron of Bertrand de Bouillon?"

Monsieur Casserole shrugged his shoulders.

"Adolphe, he is still our chef," he said.

"Ah!" said Monsieur Lefourbe, softly, and he went out under the elevated. For once Madame Casserole neglected to smile over her prolific chin.

Three weeks later Lefourbe opened the Café Glacial almost directly across the narrow street from the Côte d'Or. Most brilliantly, with music that by its rhythm awakened memories of that far-off city, he opened to the public his brilliant Parisian café.

Most sumptuously was it furnished. Its lights shone dazzlingly, so did its silver; snowy was its linen, and deferential was the host of waiters that should serve the patrons with Parisian dishes and Parisian wines.

But, despite its splendor, it did not thrive. Only an occasional diner, straying by chance into the narrow street, ignorant of the Paradise that beckoned in the guise of the Côte d'Or, came to try the dishes of the Café Glacial. No clan grew up that made the Glacial their shrine, their goal at evening.

The waiters strayed aimlessly about, woeful that there was none to tip. In corners they gathered in black-coated groups to discuss the baseball extra which some lone diner had left behind him, with an intangible idea of enlivening the house of desolation. That fortune Monsieur Lefourbe had crossed the sea to find, it seemed a long way off.

And then one gray morning disaster knocked at the door of Monsieur Casserole's rooms over the Côte d'Or — disaster that took the material shape of a pale, gasping chef.

Clad only in his nightgown, and blinking like an owl caught in the sun, Monsieur Casserole faced the panting Adolphe.

"What brings you at this hour, so unheard of?" he asked, sharply.

Adolphe sank into a near-by chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Gone!" he sobbed. "Ah, Monsieur, it is quite gone!"

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"What is gone?" A horrible suspicion swept through Monsieur Casserole's mind, and the next instant saw it confirmed.

"The apron of Bertrande de Bouillon the master! Forever gone!"

Monsieur Casserole also sank into a chair, and also buried his face in his hands. In one flash he saw his beloved Côte d'Or deserted, like a shrine built for a forgotten god. He saw the lights out, the chairs on the tables, as for an eternal night. A terrible nausea came over him.

"*Le travail du diable*," he groaned. "What is this? For ten years I —"

"As a painter or a sculptor has his model —" began Adolphe tearfully, but Casserole cut him off.

"*Malpeste!* A thousand times I have heard that. Search! Search! It is not for strong men to sit weeping."

"All the night I have search," Adolphe cried. "On the fire escape outside our flat Nanette the wife hangs the apron of the master each evening to dry, when she has washed from it the stains of the day's work. There last night she placed it. Again, she come for it. *Morbleu!* It is gone! The apron of Bertrand de Bouillon, without which —"

Monsieur Casserole stood up and groped blindly for his clothes.

"The Côte d'Or must go on without it," he said firmly, though his lip twitched.

"*Nom d'un nom*, how?" shrieked Adolphe. "Without it! *Tonnerre de Brest!* As well might the world go on without the sun. The apron of the master, the inspiration for my bouillabaisse, my omelets, my filets. Without it! Of all ideas the most impossible!"

"The Côte d'Or goes on without it," repeated Monsieur Casserole, with added firmness.

And it did, but, oh, how dolefully! When the first regular patron tasted his filet that night, he looked up quickly as though someone had dealt him a blow. Hurriedly he summoned Monsieur Casserole, who came, hollow cheeked, wide eyed, as a man sick of a fever.

"What is this?" cried the patron, as though he believed himself the victim of a bad dream. "Soggy with grease! Cold! Tough as the dish for a hod carrier! Never in the days I have eaten here —"

"Ah Monsieur, spare me!" cried Casserole. "Our chef, he is ill. So, most poorly does he cook today. Monsieur is at liberty to dine elsewhere until the chef recovers."

"Never!" cried the diner. It has been mentioned that the Côte d'Or was with some a religion. "Never! The wine is still the best in the world. I will dine here, and on wine, waiting the recovery of the poor chef."

So spoke the other regular patrons, among them the five who alone knew of the apron of inspiration, and who alone heard the story of its loss. Too loyal, too sincere in their worship, were the lovers of the Côte d'Or, to desert it in the dark hour that had come upon it.

Dolefully, as became those dining

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in a house of desolation, they stayed on, making nightly vain efforts to eat filets that were burned in grease, omelets that stayed long on the stomach's conscience, *baba au rhum* that seemed an abomination in the eyes of all diners of discrimination, coffee most unspeakable, yet none dropped from the ranks. Ah, it was a noble martyrdom, was that of the Côte d'Or's faithful!

But not as martyrs did all who had been accustomed to seek this lost Paris shrine. There were many who came there only to eat — not to dream themselves back across the sea in the gay city, not to fix in their minds the name Côte d'Or inseparably with the hour of dining. These, when the blow fell, but sighed and went away. They went away, and *mon Dieu!* did not Monsieur Casserole, standing sadly in the front of his once crowded but now nearly emptied café, see whither they went? The doors of the Café Glacial swung often and merrily, the place buzzed with trade, the waiters smiled at thought of the last liberal tip as they hurried about among the crowded tables. Monsieur Lefourbe, glancing out occasionally toward the now cheerless Café Côte d'Or, shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

Three weeks of sorrow and pathetic martyrdom dragged slowly by. The smile of Madame Casserole had become nothing but a memory. One night the five — Dupree and the Gates girl, Masters the medical and Hargrave the hack, and Betty Martin — gathered at the Côte d'Or in a solemn conclave and discussed the marvelous apron of Bertrand de Bouillon, and its mysterious disappearance. The proprietor hovered over their table and bemoaned, as indeed he did continually now, the loss of his trade, his reputation, and finally his hope.

"Ah, if only Adolphe had never found it in his head — this idea so foolish of the apron! Me, I cannot understand."

Masters the medical smiled.

"The artistic temperament," he said, and glanced at Dupree, who painted, and the others, who wrote. "It is not for you and me to try to understand that, Monsieur. Now, medically, I could very easily explain this freak of Adolphe's. It is a very common form of monomania. I might give you the scientific name for it. It is known as —"

"Not much," broke in Hargrave. "You don't throw anything like that at a man who is down, at least not while I am around. By the way, Casserole, I have been wondering — is there nowhere we could obtain an apron like this Bertrand de Bouillon thing? Minus the inspiration — the master influence, you know — but not so minus that Adolphe would get wise."

"Ah! to fool Adolphe on this apron surely you propose it jokingly," sighed Monsieur Casserole. "The apron of his master — by a mere touch, by the way his heart made music or was sad when he put it on, he

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would know. Besides," he added more practically, "not outside of Paris ten years ago could an apron made as this, with such buckles, be obtained. I have — I have tried. *Non*, the Côte d'Or is a thing of the past."

Dupree suddenly got up from his chair and sent a waiter for a cab. The others looked after him wonderingly.

"Back in a minute," he cried from the door; "as you love me, wait for me." And he rushed out.

Still wondering, they waited, almost in silence, sipping the wine that was the one remaining badge of the café's erstwhile glory. In twenty minutes Dupree was back carrying a bundle. He opened it, and lo —

"The apron of Bertrand de Bouillon," Monsieur Casserole fairly screamed.

"Not exactly," said Dupree. "No, only the apron of a poor art student in the days when he dined at the café where Bertrand ruled supreme. Ten years ago, at a little shop in the Quarter, I bought this apron to protect my only suit of clothes from the flying paint — and now I bless the poverty that made it necessary. For behold, I have ushered in sunshine; I have brought again to the face of Madame Casserole that long absent smile. If any gentleman will kindly pass me two eggs and a rabbit, I will endeavor —"

"*Non, non*," broke in Casserole, "it is wild. It is impossible." But his eyes shone with a light that had been a stranger to them for weeks. "To deceive Adolphe — ah, that is too much! We cannot do it. It would be —"

"Pish, tush!" said Masters. "Adolphe is only the victim of a mental hallucination. Tell him this is the apron of the mighty Bertie Bouillon, and his omelets will again taste like advance agents of heaven. But how shall we slip this long-lost piece of dry goods back to him?"

Dupree's plan prevailed. A small boy was brought in from the street, taught his story, and with the bogus apron pushed out into the marvelous kitchen where Adolphe, forlorn, dreary, struggled with the dishes it had once been the joy of his life to prepare. One look he got at the apron, and he pounced upon it in a frenzy of delight. He hugged it to his bosom; he smoothed out tenderly the rumpled folds; he wept in the ecstasy of his happiness. Then he shouted for Monsieur Casserole, waiting tremblingly within call.

"It is back," he cried, "*mon cher tablier*, it is back. So long, so long without it, and ah, the dreary omelets I have prepared alone! As the painter or the sculptor —"

"*Oui*. Yes, verily, it is the apron," said Monsieur Casserole. "Ah, Adolphe, never did I expect to live for this happiness! Put it on, Adolphe. Put it on."

"*Oui! Oui!* Never again is it to leave me." Adolphe struggled wildly with the buckles. "Never! With it I sleep. *Oui*, it is on. The orders! Now let me hear the orders."

They came. Escargots à la Casserole. Salsifis. Omelet soufflé. And

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the hand of the master was at work again! Ah, what dishes did Adolphe not send out by the smiling waiters of the Côte d'Or that night! Madame Casserole lured back the long absent smile to its place above the encored chin: Monsieur Casserole again hovered over his guests with the hope that all was well, this time certain of his replies.

Dupree took one mouthful of an omelet, and felt it melting into a liquid delight. His face grew suddenly sad. Margaret Gates, happy again over her beloved escargots, always quick to catch his moods, saw it.

"What is it, Billy?" she asked.

"Nothing," he answered with a sigh. "I was just thinking — why couldn't that have been the apron of genius in the days when I wore it?"

"Does it make you so very unhappy, Billy?"

"What?"

"That the theater pays you so much money for the scenes you paint, when you might be starving and worshiping Art somewhere — in an attic?"

"It is a great cross to bear," he answered, smiling. "If only you would help me bear it, dear. When, oh, when, are you going to surrender? Or must I give up both you and my Art?"

The little Gates girl pretended to taste the food that Adolphe had prepared. But most unkindly it began to choke her. She was so happy; Madame Casserole, Monsieur, the guests, Adolphe in the kitchen, the waiters — all were so happy. In the eyes of Billy Dupree alone sadness lingered. She had always intended to take him some day. Now she looked at him, a great tenderness in her eyes.

"If you wish," she whispered, "a week from today — I will marry you."

Ah! there was joy in the Café Côte d'Or the night the apron of Bertrand de Bouillon came back, and on the nights that followed. Word soon spread among the old patrons that the odd indisposition of Adolphe the great chef was at an end, and they flocked back in droves, crowding the tables and waiting by the cage of Madame for seats.

It was as though the Côte d'Or were a ship that had been a long time at sea, and had now come home again to find a host of friends waiting on the dock with words of love and cheer. Across the street in the Café Glacial, the lights again shone on unused silver and vacant chairs. Monsieur Lefourbe, gazing out at the Côte d'Or, cursed like one of the villains in the shows for which Dupree painted the scenery.

The little Gates girl and the artist were married on the day she had set, and that night at the Côte d'Or the largest table was reserved for their wedding supper, to which only Masters, Hargrave, and Betty Martin were invited. Monsieur hovered about them continually, a dumb gratitude in his eyes. The best that Adolphe could cook — and those who were again revelling in his dishes knew what that meant — he sent to that table.

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Long into the night many patrons celebrated the renaissance of the café that was their religion, their goal, their shrine. Long into the night they sat over cordial and coffee, after the adorable dishes of Adolphe, dreaming themselves back under the awnings of the gay city, in the shade of the absinthe frappé.

At length the other diners ended their dreams and paid their bills, and only the five remained.

Madame Casserole came out of her cage and waddled toward them, in all the glory of her smile. Monsieur closed the door on the last jovial guest, and also came toward them, smiling. Never, it seemed, had there been a happier moment in the Café Côte d'Or.

And then a terrible thing happened.

The door opened and he came in, that rogue Lefourbe, unsavory keeper of an impossible café. Under his arm he carried something of cloth. Unseeing he passed the diners and their hosts, and, pushing open the swinging doors, walked straight into the kingdom of Adolphe.

With one accord Monsieur and Madame, terror on their faces, followed. Dupree motioned the crowd, and, with him leading, the five swept past the barrier into that sacred, that marvelous kitchen.

Lefourbe was holding toward Adolphe an apron, and the latter stood as a man in a dream listening to the rascal's words.

"One night, as I wandered in a side street, the wind swept this in my path," Lefourbe lied blithely. "I picked it up. Then I thought it only an apron. But today did I learn that it is the apron of the great Bertrand de Bouillon. But today did the name of the owner reach me. Me, I am very sorry, I hastened here with it. Ah, that I have caused no inconvenience!"

He gazed about him sneeringly.

"Not for worlds would I have caused inconvenience."

Adolphe's face was not pleasant to look upon. He took in his hand the restored apron of the master, and turned on Monsieur Casserole.

"This, what is it that it means?" he screamed.

Terror was written in every line of Casserole's face. Lefourbe laughed to see it.

"Forgive me, Adolphe," cried the proprietor of the Côte d'Or piteously; "for the good of our café I did it. For the good of all of us. *Morbleu!* I must do it or —"

"For a week," roared Adolphe, and his face was terrible to see, "without the apron of Bertrand de Bouillon I have cooked, and that which I have cooked has been such as might have won the praise of the master himself. Without the inspiration of his gift, alone, not gaining hourly from his beloved apron the strength to cook for his glory and that of France. This I have done?"

Lefourbe spoke. "So, Adolphe, you have done. Without the apron of inspiration. *Non*, with an apron oh, so base, forced on you by enemies. As the painter or the sculptor —"

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"*Malpeste!* So be it!" cried Adolphe.

The door of the great stove was open; within the red coals glowed savagely. Before anyone had grasped his purpose, had dreamed of an enormity so great, Adolphe had thrown into the fire the gift of the master, Bertrand de Bouillon. The flames caught it gleefully, as though they had long waited such food from the hand of such a chef. They swirled about it madly. In a second the apron of genius was but a mass of glowing ashes.

"*Mon Dieu!* what is this you have done?" shrieked Monsieur Casserole. "You have ruined us all, you fool! Where is my café now? In a second you have made it ashes. For ten years I have served here the best of our people. In a second! Gone! *Sangbleu!*"

He fell to a stool and covered his face with his hands. Vainly he sought to shut out that horrible picture of the end of his glory. He knew now that his final week of success had been given him only in mockery. In the doorway stood Madame Casserole, tears streaming down the fat cheeks the smile had been wont to adorn.

"Ruined us!" sobbed Monsieur. "For ten years the Café Côte d'Or —"

He paused, for he had seen the terrible look on the face of Adolphe.

"Eggs!" screamed the once mighty chef.

An assistant brought them.

"The skillet!"

It also was forthcoming.

"Butter!"

Monsieur Casserole himself tremblingly put it in Adolphe's hands.

Then they stood back, scarcely daring to breathe, waiting with open mouths and swiftly beating hearts the making of that omelet.

And now it lay, steaming, on a plate. Foamy and soft it looked — but, ah, could it be so, with the apron of the great Bertrand —

"Taste!" roared Adolphe, in an awful voice, pointing his monster fork at little Mrs. Dupree.

They pushed her forward. She had been the one selected for the ordeal — why, no one could say, but it was for her to carry it through.

Tremblingly she inserted a fork into the hot mass. Tremblingly she raised a morsel to her lips. It disappeared. Monsieur Casserole grasped the edge of the table till his hands went white. Madame leaned forward fatly, in imminent danger of tipping.

"The taste?" Adolphe's voice was still terrible to hear.

The little bride closed her eyes.

"Of heaven," she whispered.

"God be praised!" cried Monsieur Casserole.

"De Bouillon! Bah!" blasphemed Adolphe.

"*Le diable!*" muttered Lefourbe.

And Madame Casserole was smiling through her tears.

Thus was the bugbear of the apron of Bertrand de Bouillon forever banished from the Café Côte d'Or.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Richard West's "Hard Bargain" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Eighth Annual Contest. It is an amazingly polished story, told with remarkable economy — indeed, an extraordinarily professional story to have been written by a beginner in the difficult art of putting words together; and it has a genuine folklore quality as well. Altogether a noteworthy achievement for a 'tec tyro . . .

The author has not yet reached his middle twenties. He was born in San Francisco, received his B.S. from Fordham University in 1950, joined the United States Army in the same year as a second lieutenant, got married in 1951, and at the time he wrote "Hard Bargain" was stationed in Cambridge, England. He has four hobbies: reading, photography, collecting pipes, and collecting Viennese recipes. He writes from what might be literally called an inner compulsion, or as Mr. West expresses it, "because a story gives me indigestion until I cough it up." The name "Richard West" is a pseudonym, and when asked by your Editors for the origin or meaning of the pen-name, the author replied: "I can only say that its genesis is different from Hilary King's or Sebastian Tombs' " — which at least gives us a clue to "Mr. West's" reading in the mystery field.

HARD BARGAIN

by RICHARD WEST

THERE WAS A CERTAIN MAN WHO, being dissatisfied with his luck, decided that Heaven was unavailing to help him, and that he should look elsewhere for assistance. Accordingly, one midnight, having sacrificed a white rooster with a pentagram, he began to recite the Lord's Prayer backwards. As he concluded with the words "Heaven in art Which, Father Our," he looked about him and observed a small, unobtrusive, dapper-looking person in gray nearby.

The man made deep obeisance to the visitor on his knees, and addressed him as follows:

"All hail, dark Majesty! Lord of true power on the earth and beneath it, all hail! Behold, your suppliant servant offers you your due homage and adoration: All hail!" For he felt that these were the appropriate words in which to address the personage before him.

The man in gray, however, said: "Get up off your knees, you booby!

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Who do you think I am, anyway?"

"Are you not then His Satanic Majesty?" stammered the man, in puzzlement. Then his face cleared: "But of course! The affairs of that august Prince are undoubtedly too many and too grand for him to attend in person to every such piddling call as mine. You are some lesser Angel of Evil, and quite rightly refuse the tribute which befits your Master alone."

"That I deny," replied the man in gray, "and if you will consider the matter, you will see that no one ever admits truthfully to being either Satan himself or any of his minions. For, first, it is common knowledge that the Devil is the Prince of Liars, and that he never speaks truth when a lie will better serve his purpose; and second, it must be obvious that he can best ensnare the souls of men if he persuades them that neither he nor his fiery kingdom exist." He laughed shortly. "Here, of course, I have assumed for the sake of argument that there is such a being as your horned and fire-walking Fiend; like those addled theologians who must have a God to explain every happy chance, and His opposite number to account for the ill. Were your mind more enlightened, the absurdity of your whole proposition would be clear."

"But who are you if not the Devil?" queried the first man, dumbfounded.

"You may call me Nicholas," responded the second.

A sly grin came to the face of the would-be diabolist. "Ah, I see. Well then, old Nick — if I may address you — will you listen to a business proposition, clear and simple?"

"I am a businessman, from first to last. I am always ready to listen."

"Good. I wish, in that case, to discuss with you the terms of a hypothetical contract, which might be arrived at between myself and the person I thought you were at first — save, of course, that he does not exist. Are you willing to discuss such terms?"

"Since I have nothing better to do at the moment — yes."

"I can suggest my offer at once. It would be the usual one in a contract of this sort."

"I understand," replied the small gray man. "And for this price, you would desire to receive —?"

Here the crafty look of the other's face deepened, for he had long considered the demands he would make.

"Three things. Item One: eternal life. Item Two: eternal youth. Item Three: eternal happiness."

"Hmm. Your choice of terms is somewhat unfortunate, since they are — barring the second — specifically mentioned as promises of the opposite party to its adherents; and indeed, the adjective 'eternal' is so reserved in popular usage to the God-myth that your intended partner, did he exist, would almost certainly object to it. Nevertheless, I am sure that the choice of words need not stand in the way of an agreement."

"Could you propose alternate terms,

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conveying the same guarantees, but unobjectionable?"

"Let me see — yes, I think so. Say for the first item: life for at least as long as you desire it?"

"Splendid! And the second?"

"For the second item: that your appearance shall not age a single day from henceforth, and that you shall have strength sufficient to all your needs for all your life?"

"Even better than my original suggestion!"

"And for the third item: that your every sorrow will end today and your dearest wishes achieve speedy realization."

"Good enough! Now, how would one formalize such a contract?"

"The conventional mind again at work! Is not your Devil supposed to be a gentleman, and is not a gentleman's agreement binding?"

"Well — perhaps. Still, I should like to see so important a transaction set down in writing; as you yourself pointed out, my non-existent party of the first part" — he winked meaningfully — "is known as the Prince of Liars — no disrespect intended, of course; but when one deals with a person so reputed for sharp practice —"

The other sighed. "Ah, well. If you must amuse yourself with such fancies, the best authority on the subject says that the contract should be written and signed in your own blood."

"Done at once!" And the man slashed his arm, sharpened a wing-feather of the rooster so lately slain, and began to scribble on the back of a talismanic parchment lying in his pentagram. "Yes, indeed, the best authority!" he chuckled as he wrote. He signed with a flourish, and held up the red-scrawled document for inspection. "Are the terms as decided?"

"They appear to be correct."

"Then all that lacks is the other signature. A pity that it cannot be obtained; but tell me, how do you think it would be executed, if the proper party were here?"

"I should imagine, in some such fashion as this." The gray man let fall on the contract a few drops of wax from the black scented candle with which the other had illumined his rite, and rapped the seal smartly with a large signet ring on his left hand. The wax showed a crowned serpent, twisted to form a letter *S*. He returned the parchment to its writer.

"Thank you, thank you, dear Nicholas! What joy, what relief, so easily to have assured my future! Though, if I may say so, I think I have driven a hard bargain."

"It may well be that you have."

"But now, let me have from your own lips some words of guidance for the best beginning of my new life. Suggest some glorious achievement that will make me famous, and so enhance your own renown."

The man who called himself Nicholas appeared sunk in thought for a few moments. Then he said, slowly, "There is a mountain hereabouts, whose southern face, I believe, no man has yet attempted to climb —"

"Magnificent!" interrupted the

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other. "A splendid start for a splendid new life; my name will resound throughout the world. And I thank you — thank you more than words can say; for you were not, strictly, required by the contract to make the suggestion."

"Perhaps not," replied the man in gray. "Still, as you say, you drive a hard bargain."

He next saw the gray man several hours later that morning. At this time he was pinned firmly in a crevasse of a glacier on the mountainside he had attempted to climb, and was writhing in agony, face upward, as the slow-moving ice crushed life from him. In desperation he had just laid his one free hand on the knife at his belt, when the gray man appeared. The man who called himself Nicholas was seated cross-legged on the glacier's surface, looking at him amusedly.

"Ah — you devil!" the other gasped out. Then he forced a ghastly chuckle. "But I still have the best of my bargain; you have broken your contract, and your claim upon me is forfeit. Instead of eternal life, youth, and happiness, you have given me a miserable and untimely death; and I shall not pay your price."

"I deny," said the other, "as I have from the first, that I am the one you name. This being so, the contract you say I have broken was from the first meaningless, except insofar as it expressed your own evil will. Nevertheless, your obstinate mind does not admit these facts; and therefore I will tell you that, even granting your suppositions, it appears to me that your contract has not been violated, and that you are as much bound by it now as you ever were."

Author's Challenge: How did the man in gray prove his statement?

"You lie. Where is my eternal life?"

"The contract refers not to eternal life but to 'Life for at least as long as you shall desire it'; and if I am not very much mistaken, you have already not only ceased to desire life but begun to wish rather ardently that it would depart from you — as witness the knife in your hand."

The man in the crevasse blanched. His voice came thick and harsh: "My eternal youth?"

"You demanded that your appearance should not age a single day from henceforth. Nor will it, while your body is locked in the ice of this glacier — which will be, I daresay, until long after you have ceased to care one way or the other. Furthermore," he continued, "you required strength sufficient to all your needs for all your life. With your knife and your free arm, you have, if you will use it, strength to answer your — shall I say? — most *pressing* need; and incidentally achieve the third, as well, of the three things guaranteed you in the contract."

The man in the glacier looked at his hand holding the knife, and uttered a cry. "I am a fool!"

"Quite," nodded the man in gray; "A damned fool."

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A new story by one of England's "greatest regional novelists"

THE WAY ROUND

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

I SUPPOSE I AM REALLY GETTING nearer to this Pike," said Leadbetter doubtfully. The lane had wound upwards for so long, without bringing the Pike appreciably nearer, that his spirits had begun to flag and his purpose to falter. After all, why trouble to climb up to Higgin Pike?

The Pike was a bare undecorated structure, raised on the peak of the massive Higgin Brow to commemorate Waterloo; thus it had neither beauty nor great antiquity to commend it. Rather childish, really, the wish to lay his hand on the dark stone walls of the austere monument, and read the carved inscription . . .

Still — the Pike was a landmark, visible for many miles and from several counties; that Leadbetter, who set his stories in this countryside, had never visited the Pike seemed to falsify his claim to intimacy with his material.

"I'll go on for another twenty minutes," he decided crossly.

He rounded a fold of the hill and exclaimed with pleasure. Tucked into the side of the slope lay a small gray farmhouse. "300 years old if it's a day," thought Leadbetter, eyeing its mullioned windows and pleased to find his judgment confirmed by the date above the door. In front of the porch stood a neat little motor van, brightly painted in yellow and pale blue.

The back doors of the van stood wide open, and as Leadbetter approached, the interior revealed itself as a traveling shop. Brushes dangled, biscuit tins gleamed; a pair of blue-painted scales stood on a low wooden shelf beside a large roll of bacon, the confining string of which the driver-salesman was just slitting with a sharp efficient knife. This salesman, a short, brown-faced youngish man in a white coat and apron, called out a loud greeting as Leadbetter drew near.

"Good afternoon!"

At his cheerful cry the other occupant of the van whirled round to face Leadbetter. She was a young woman, fair, flushed, and rather pretty in an unkempt way; though carelessly dressed in a dirty flowered apron over a skimpy black frock, her body showed agreeable lines. Her legs were bare, her feet thrust into rather surprisingly elegant pale blue bedroom slippers. The wind — there is always a wind on the Pennine slopes — tossed the hem of her short frock and Leadbetter could see that her legs were white and very shapely.

She held in a wedding-ringed hand some ration books, at least one of which was green, so presumably,

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thought Leadbetter (who though an old bachelor lived with a married niece), she was a wife and mother. A lonely place for so young a woman to spend her life . . .

Whereas the salesman grinned cheerfully at Leadbetter, showing white teeth, the stare the girl gave him was sullen and hostile.

"What do you want?" she demanded sharply, in Yorkshire tones.

Leadbetter was not offended.

"Excuse me," he said politely. "But do you mind telling me where I am? I am out for a walk and have lost myself. What farm is this?"

There was a pause, then the girl said:

"It's Higgin Ley."

"Ah! Then presumably I'm not far from Higgin Pike."

This remark had the odd effect of changing both his listeners' expressions, but in opposite ways; for the girl now relaxed into a half-smile, while the salesman's grin faded and his face looked bleak.

"No, you're not far," said the girl in a friendly tone, apparently relieved to find he was not in search of her house. "Keep straight on up the lane till you're right round the corner of Higgin Brow; then there's a path up to the top."

"It's a long steep way," said the salesman, shaking his head.

"Nay, it's not so far Tom," said the girl, who seemed surprised by his comment.

"It's not easy to find the path across the moor, either."

"There's heaps of stones, cairns like, to mark the way across the heather."

"Aye, but through the grass there's no plain way. And when you get there it's nowt," said the salesman disgustedly.

"You haven't any ice cream in your van, I suppose?" inquired Leadbetter pleasantly.

"No."

"You've some soft drinks though," suggested the girl.

"Nothing he'd fancy, I don't expect."

In spite of this discouragement Leadbetter bought a bottle; the salesman uncapped it for him and having asked permission, Leadbetter perched on the low wall before the house to drink its somewhat thin and tasteless contents.

"Now, Mrs. Hoyle," said the salesman briskly, "we may as well get on with our business. I've a lot of calls to make this afternoon."

They fell into a long discussion of Higgin Ley's requirements.

When he had finished his drink and rested his legs, Leadbetter came up to the back of the van and handed in the empty bottle.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Hoyle," he said. "I'm a writer, and I'm interested in these things — does your husband find his livelihood only in the farm? I see you have sheep and a cow and some hens, but no crops — at this height crops wouldn't be possible I suppose? Or does he work at some trade down in the valley, as well?"

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There was a pause.

"What business is it of yours?" demanded the salesman in a truculent tone.

"None — none at all," stammered Leadbetter, taken aback. "I beg your pardon — I didn't mean to be intrusive."

"She's lost her husband, see?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! Please forgive me."

"He worked down in Elder Vale, over the other side of the Brow," said the girl. "But he's gone off and left me."

Her chin quivered and tears stood in her eyes as she spoke, and Leadbetter was horrified by his lack of tact.

"I offer my most sincere apologies for raising such a painful subject. Please forgive me," said Leadbetter in genuine distress.

"Keep on the lane till you get right round the shoulder," said the girl, speaking as if to show she bore no ill-will.

"You'd best keep on the lane all the way and give the Pike a miss — you'll come down round the back into Elder Vale," advised the salesman.

"Well, I may do so," said Leadbetter, not wanting to argue the question. "Good day." He had no hat to raise, but bowed his head in polite farewell.

As soon as he was out of sight of Higgin Ley, the lane deteriorated; first it became rough, with two narrow causeways of flat stones to take the wheels of carts, then it turned into a green lane, grass-covered but with ruts of earth which were evidently, Leadbetter thought, still practicable for cart or car, for he saw tire-marks in them — he took an innocent pride in the acuteness of his observation in such small details.

He walked on and on and up and up, and presently one wall of the lane ceased and it lay open to the moor, and then the other wall dropped away likewise.

At long last he rounded the great towering shoulder of Higgin Brow.

"Why, the path's quite plain!" he exclaimed with delight, for indeed the track showed clearly through the long tough grass. "It must be used more than one would think likely," he reflected as he strode happily along.

He reached the heather and found the cairns. Between the last cairn and the Pike there was rather a long gap — as though, he thought testily, one cairn had been removed — and he strayed off the track for a while over very rough ankle-twisting ground, so that he was truly glad when at length he found it again. But soon he stood beside Higgin Pike, slapped its dark stone flank, and greeted it as a friend.

"I've seen you a thousand times," he told it in triumph. "Now I touch you at last. I've always wanted to stand here; always felt it had some special meaning for me. What a view!"

The view was certainly magnificent; one felt, indeed, that one stood

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on the roof of England. As his eyes roved over the superb panorama, Leadbetter saw the little grocer's van, still standing in front of the farmhouse at Higgin Ley; from this height it looked like a child's very tiny toy on a patterned carpet.

"Well, let's have a look at *you* now," said Leadbetter to Higgin Pike.

He read the inscription — the monument dated from Waterloo, as he had been told. He entered the plinth, climbed a few very dark and smelly stairs, and came out on the platform, from which the view was even better than before.

He patted the side of the great pointing finger, then came down the stairs and walked all round the monument. The four sides of the square plinth were continued beyond the corners as buttresses, so that these protruding walls enclosed eight compartments, open to the air above and in front, but sheltered at the sides from wind and weather.

Leadbetter, determined to do the thing thoroughly while he was about it, looked carefully into each compartment.

In one of them a sheep's ribs and skull revealed a winter's moorland tragedy; in another, which by the contour of the land enjoyed only a narrow view of a neighboring rock, a great pile of stones lay heaped against the back wall.

"I wonder who piled these stones, and why," mused Leadbetter, visualizing a picnic party and a game.

He moved on into the next compartments.

Many initials and dates were carved upon the walls.

All of these spoke to Leadbetter's heart, and his imagination began to work. He imagined the young men who had carved their initials, with their girls watching in tender admiration.

Coming to the front of the Pike, he looked down again towards Higgin Ley farm — the little van had left the door and was crawling slowly up the lane. Now Leadbetter was again in the compartment with the pile of stones. He laughed a little and preened himself because he had invented a good reason for the pile of stones, and sitting down on them he began to plan the story he would write and consider the magazine for which it might be suitable.

Suddenly he started and cried out, for a shadow fell on him. A man had entered the stone compartment.

"You gave me quite a fright," he cried pettishly to the van salesman, rising from the stones.

"*You* gave *us* a fright," retorted the salesman. "We saw you up here, you know, from the farm. You kept disappearing and appearing again, and never coming down; we thought there might be something wrong. So I brought the van along up the lane. I thought you might like a lift down into Elder Vale."

He spoke genially, but gave the writer a searching glance.

"It's very kind of you I'm sure,"

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said Leadbetter. He felt a fool, discovered mooning on a pile of viewless stones, and he did not want a lift; he wanted to walk slowly and quietly, alone, down into the valley, thinking about his projected tale. Partly to explain this and excuse himself from the proffered lift, and partly from mere literary vanity, he began:

"A writer finds material for his stories everywhere — even at Higgin Pike."

"What sort of a writer are you, then?"

Leadbetter, not altogether without pride, gave his name. As it seemed to convey nothing to the salesman, he added shortly:

"I write novels and short stories."

"And what story did you find up here?" said the salesman, standing before him with feet apart and arms akimbo.

"Well — you won't be offended?"

"Why should I?" said the salesman, a trifle grim.

"Your neat little van standing at Higgin Ley Farm such a long time; Mrs. Hoyle such a pretty young woman; the heap of stones here. They suggested a story to me. If you — the van salesman of my story, that is — were the woman's lover, and the husband coming home from work took the short cut over the Brow and saw the van and guessed his wife's secret . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, then the following week when the van was due again, the husband might lie in wait for the van and kill the salesman and hide the body up here beneath a heap of stones like these. Of course there are one or two snags — difficulties, you know," mused Leadbetter comfortably — he always enjoyed talking about his craft; "in the way of verisimilitude. But I shall cope with them."

"It might be the other way round," said the salesman.

"The other way round?"

"When the husband attacked the salesman, the husband might have got the worst of it."

"That's hardly likely, is it?" said Leadbetter doubtfully. "The husband is a farmer, after all, a hardy vigorous fellow, country bred. The van salesman — no offense, my dear chap — is just a townsman. A grocer. Indoor occupation. Mentally shrewd, no doubt, but lacking muscle."

"That would depend on what he did in the war."

"Well, yes — so it might. I could try it that way round. But it's not quite such a good story that way. Or wait a minute — is it?"

"I think it *was* that way round."

"You do?" Pleased by his interest in the literary problem, Leadbetter turned to the van salesman with a smile.

The smile froze as he saw the gleam of the bacon knife in Mrs. Hoyle's lover's hand.

"My God! You killed him!" shouted Leadbetter.

Very soon there were two piles of stones between the buttresses at the foot of Higgin Pike.

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A new story about the famous Inspector French

TWO BIRDS WITH ONE SPANNER

by FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

THE NIGHT WAS DARK WITH AN overcast sky and a damp wind moaning dismally through the trees. Just the night, thought George Broad, for his purpose: too dark to be seen, too noisy to be heard. Yet he was gripped by a terrible fear, for in the enterprise he was undertaking nothing less than his life was at stake.

His trouble was money, money, money! Where his money went to he did not know, but he never seemed to have enough. His salary as an engineer in a large ironworks was adequate, yet his debts kept accumulating. Now things were worse than ever. He had decided to try to marry Gladys Silitoe, and she wanted the earth. But the scheme was worth an effort. If he could pull it off he would have no further troubles, for Gladys was wealthy.

He had quickly found that on his salary alone he would get nowhere, and he had had recourse to a moneylender named Fleming. An uncle was leaving him a few hundred pounds, and on these prospects he obtained an advance. But Fleming made him pay for it. The interest was outrageous, and he was left in no doubt that the first default in his payments would mean an approach to the head of his firm — and that would mean ruin, complete ruin.

While things were in this state, nemesis of another kind overtook him. Before the Gladys scheme had crystallized he had been amusing himself with a young woman whose husband, a commercial traveler, had convenient absences from home. Broad now wished to forget the affair, but the lady had other ideas. She had written him, as he felt, in a most injudicious manner.

It happened that on receipt of her letter he had thrust it into his wallet for later study. When he reached home in the evening the wallet was gone. Whether it had been stolen or he had dropped it he did not know, but he hoped it was really lost.

The fates were against him. That evening he had a caller. Sydney Carlow introduced himself as a clerk in a local store. He had found the wallet, and if a small reward were offered, would be glad to return it. Broad said it would certainly be worth a fiver to him, and here it was. But this was not Carlow's idea. Two hundred he thought a more reasonable figure. Broad raved and threatened, but to no purpose. When Carlow left he had his 200 and Broad had the letter.

So far Broad might have weathered

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the storm, but some weeks later his difficulties reached a new high. Carlow called again. He explained that sometime previously he had been forced to borrow from moneylender Fleming. Repayment was now due and he showed a demand note from Fleming as proof. Unfortunately, he was exactly £100 short of the amount. He had asked Fleming to give him extra time with this 100, but Fleming had refused. If Broad would help him to this extent he would never hear from him again. Almost apologetically, he pointed out that though he no longer had the letter, a word to Gladys Silitoe would be equally effective.

Broad saw a chasm opening beneath his feet. To Carlow's demands there would be no end. He had just 100 in cash, but to pay it would leave him without money to entertain Gladys during the immediate future. He saw indeed that if he were to pay, he might as well give up all thought of the marriage.

It was at this point that Broad's mind turned towards crime. A reader of detective stories, he had often amused himself by constructing murder plots. Now he saw how he could use one of his ideas.

Grimly, he delivered an ultimatum to Carlow. Before paying, he must have a protection against further demands. Carlow must sign a statement that if this £100 were paid, it would meet his entire claim. Carlow stared, but seeing that Broad was in earnest, he shrugged incredulously and wrote the document. Broad thereupon handed over the money. So his first fence was taken.

Being unable to meet Gladys, Broad wrote her that owing to an attack of influenza he would be confined to the house for a few days. Of necessity, he wrote similarly to his works superintendent.

That evening Broad took a block of cheap writing paper, and using Carlow's statement as a copy, produced the following letter in a passable imitation of the clerk's hand:

> Dear Mr. Fleming,
>
> This is to say that I have now obtained the hundred pounds I was short to pay my debt. If convenient to you, I will call about 9:00 on Wednesday evening with the money.
>
> Yours sincerely,
> Sydney Carlow

Putting this note in his wallet, Broad rang up Fleming. The old man lived alone with an elderly housekeeper and he answered the phone himself. Broad said he was anxious to raise a small further sum against which he had good security, and that if convenient to Fleming he would like to call about 9:00 on Wednesday evening to discuss the matter. Fleming agreed to see him. Broad had chosen Wednesday because he knew that it was the housekeeper's evening off and that Fleming would be alone.

One more call and Broad's preparations would be complete. He rang up Carlow, speaking in Fleming's

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voice. He was a very good mimic.

"Mr. Carlow, it happens that there's a service you could do me for which I'd be willing to pay. In fact, I'd wipe out your entire debt. I should be glad if you'd call about 9:30 on Wednesday evening to discuss it. If you come to my study window it'll save me going to the hall door."

Carlow immediately agreed and it was obvious to Broad that he suspected nothing.

It was that Wednesday evening which was dark with the overcast sky and the damp wind moaning dismally through the trees, as shortly before 9:00 Broad approached Fleming's house. He reached it through a spinney and the garden, so as to avoid the risk of being seen on the road. In his pocket were a pair of rubber gloves and a heavy spanner.

Fleming opened the door. "Ah, come in, Mr. Broad. I'm all alone. Come into the study."

He led the way and they sat down, Fleming at his desk and Broad in the armchair facing it.

"It's a question of what you think of the security," Broad declared when he had stated his case. "Just have a look over these papers."

He handed across some folded documents, then got up and moved behind Fleming's chair. "See," he went on, pointing, "this is the important one."

As Fleming began to unfold the paper, Broad swung his spanner and brought it down on the old man's head. Fleming collapsed forward on the desk, then rolled sideways and fell to the floor.

Momentarily unnerved, Broad wiped the sweat from his forehead. Then fear forced him on. He had only half an hour before Carlow was due. Having put on his rubber gloves, he knelt beside the body and found the old man's keys. With them he opened the safe. He knew his way about in it, for during his business calls Fleming had frequently opened it in Broad's presence. In his file the moneylender had kept a folder for each client, and Broad now withdrew and pocketed his own. Fleming also had a loose-leaf ledger, arranged alphabetically — that is, without an index — and from this also Broad took the pages relating to himself. A small summarizing ledger he removed entirely. Then in Carlow's folder he placed the forged letter. Lastly, he opened the money drawer and extracted some hundreds of pound and ten-shilling notes, though leaving enough to avoid the suggestion of burglary. Closing the safe, he replaced the keys on the body. Then looking round to make sure he had left no traces, he crossed to the French window, unlocked it, and slipped silently out, leaving it open behind him. He passed through the garden and spinney and reached his home unseen.

He thought he had done well. He had got rid of Fleming without leaving any identifying trace on the scene of the crime. By removing his own

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folder and the ledger material, no evidence remained of any connection between himself and the dead man. But Carlow's folder showed not only a vital connection with Fleming, but also recorded an appointment at the place and what would be taken as the approximate time of the murder. When questioned, Carlow would certainly say he had been framed, but who would believe him? Even if he himself suspected the truth, he was unlikely to mention it since firstly, he could not prove it, and secondly, it would reveal his blackmail.

Yes, Broad was now free from his enemies. He had recovered his payment to Carlow — and perhaps a little more — and the law would soon eliminate Carlow and with him the menace of blackmail. It was a smart bit of work and all he now had to do was to sit tight and know nothing.

Unhappily for Broad, things didn't work out quite as he had intended. In the first place, Carlow showed unexpected good sense. On discovering the body he immediately rang up the police. So the investigation started within an hour of the crime, instead of on the following morning, as Broad had planned.

The police followed Broad's example to the extent of taking Fleming's keys, opening his safe, and going through the moneylender's papers. On safe and file were suggestive prints of glove-covered fingers. The police quickly found Carlow's folder with the letter making the appointment. This they showed to Carlow.

To Carlow, who had been growing more and more apprehensive, it was like a rope to a drowning man. He saw in it a proof that he had been framed and believed it would lead the police to the same conclusion. Realizing that it was his only hope, he confessed his blackmail. But he declared that without Broad's hundred he had enough to meet his debt to Fleming. He had invented this detail to make his demand seem more reasonable to Broad, but all he really wanted was to make life a little easier. This statement was proved by the money he produced and the figures in Fleming's ledger.

Next morning, the police called on Broad. By this time the murder was public and they discussed it briefly. Then Inspector French seemed to turn to other business. "We wanted to see you about blackmail, Mr. Broad. We understand Carlow has been rooking you and we'd like some information about it. But as there may be two sides to the affair, I must first caution you as to anything you may say in this interview." He did so formally and resumed: "Carlow says he asked you for £100, explaining that he was 100 short of the amount due to Fleming. Is that true?"

Broad thought this line of questioning was safe enough. "Yes, that's so," he answered.

"Carlow was lying to you," declared the Inspector. "Actually, he had plenty of money to pay Fleming without getting yours."

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In spite of his own position Broad felt indignant. "Dirty liar!" he exclaimed, "cheating me like that!"

"So you might say," admitted the Inspector, adding, "We found a letter from Carlow to Fleming saying he would call last night to pay his debt."

"That so?" Broad said easily. "News to me."

"Of course," the Inspector agreed smoothly. "But the letter couldn't have been from Carlow because it mentioned the hundred pounds which Carlow knew *didn't exist* and Fleming *had never heard of!*"

Inspector French paused to let it sink in. Then he said sharply: "*Only one person believed in that £100.* Who, Mr. Broad, was that?"

Broad began a reply, then his voice died away and he sat rigid, while a ghastly horror grew in his eyes.

"Q"

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Few writers are fated to become internationally known as the result of writing a single book. Margaret Mitchell did it with her first and only book, GONE WITH THE WIND. *And it can be said that Pietro Di Donato gained a world-wide reputation with his* CHRIST IN CONCRETE, *published first as a short story in "Esquire" in 1937, and then as a full-length novel in 1939.*

Mr. Di Donato was born in West Hoboken, New Jersey, the son of Italian immigrants. His father was a bricklayer, and Pietro, following rigid family tradition, also became a wielder of the trowel and a leveler of the mortar — an ancient and honorable vocation. CHRIST IN CONCRETE *was almost completely autobiographical, which accounts in part for its authenticity and its power.*

"The Society of the White Button" is a short story that might easily have been a chapter in CHRIST IN CONCRETE. *It is a tale of the bitter rivalry between hodcarriers and bricklayers, among the paesanos of West Hoboken, and of the tough secret society that made and carried out its own laws. And even in this comparatively short story you will find all the things the critics found in* CHRIST IN CONCRETE: *passion, humor, pathos, a lyrical and bawdy style, and all "full of echoes of Italy."*

We are deeply indebted to B. L. Sowell, of the American Embassy at Quito, Ecuador, for calling Mr. Di Donato's fine story to our attention, and for sending us a copy of the text.

THE SOCIETY OF THE WHITE BUTTON

by PIETRO DI DONATO

WHEN THE BROTHERS ANGELINI — Annibal the Vain, Attilio the Dude — came to this country in steerage, Tito and Santo Lupo were their very dearest friends. They had protected each other since they were infants in Abruzzi. At confirmation they had pledged undying union and become famous as the Little Godfathers. In America they sought out paesano girls and married. They enjoyed American wages, following, like their fathers, the calling of hodcarrier.

They insisted on working the same jobs together, and together they accomplished more than eight men, toting hods up ladders, mixing mortar, erecting scaffolds, and properly serving their masters, the bricklayers.

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Lucky was the contractor who had the brothers Lupo and the brothers Angelini.

Of course, their pleasure at being together as much as possible annoyed their wives. "Godfather here, Godfather there," thought the mothers of their children, "when will this coziness of Godfathers have an end?"

Nights and weekends they put on their best clothes and went arm in arm to the "Club," a small windowless room in the rear of Sam Puzzolenti's corner saloon opposite the Church of Saint Rocco. There, with the rest of the hodcarriers, they drank cheap wine, ate salted chick peas, played cards, bowled boccie with stone balls in the backyard, and talked largely about women and the job.

No one actually knows how The Society of the White Button started. Was it born in Tito's head, or established on secret orders from some distant authority? Maybe it had been originally founded by Garibaldi, or the Abruzzean poet D'Annunzio, or the Duke of Abruzzi when he dashed to the North Pole with a team of dogs. Well, be that as it may, under the influence of the juice of the grape, or the desire of the West Hoboken hodcarriers to set themselves apart from bricklayers, Sicilians, Neapolitans, Americans, and all such people beyond the pale, The Society of the White Button became a fact.

Dominick Lumpback, Teodoro Four-Eyes, Vincenzo Toothless, Frederico the Kaiser, Pepe Dainty-Dainty, Nick Loudmouth, Tobacco-Eater, Mario Malatesta, the Angelini and the Lupo boys, and others became a part of the closely knit Society. The only result of all their windy talk was the decision to wear on the underside of their coat lapels a white button. But they continued to carry themselves to Puzzolenti's saloon with great solemnity, and in the airless candlelit clubroom they wore their hats cocked in tough Alpine style, furiously smoked gagging Di Nobili cigars, played cards as though it were for life and death, lounged, shouted, and blasphemed with beautifully horrible oaths.

What would the future of the White Button be? Was it related to the Mafia, the Camorra, the sinister Black Hand? Would they be called upon to do daring deeds? It was exciting and frightening to think of the possibilities.

But damn it all, just who was the brains of the White Button? Without a doubt the leader on the West Hoboken Dardanelles was Tito Seared-Neck — even though he talked so modestly about the "business" of the society. Did the White Button control the Camorra, or ——? The very fact that the members of the White Button said nothing about anything proved — everything. So there! Naturally, the brothers Lupo and Angelini were the big sticks. Their conferences *sotto voce* were impressive, and the manner in which they tossed their heads *was* significant.

God save it all, had it been left at that it would have been wonderful. But suddenly a building boom came

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on. Italian building workers were approached by contractors, almost kidnaped on the streets, and offered unbelievable wages. One evening as the Angelinis left the job, a contractor putting up a house on the other side of the street mistook them for bricklayers and begged them to work for him. Up until that moment the Vain and the Dude had been content with their lot in life, but this set them on fire with ambition.

Said Concettina: "Annibal, my husband, cannot you too learn to put brick upon brick? If you were to become a bricklayer I could have a gramophone and even a player piano like the broad-chested haughty wife of Master Big-Nose."

But this was all a dream; a common hodcarrier simply did not become a craftsman of wall-building just by wishing. The Angelini men were no longer the rulers of their households; and yet it excited them to hear their wives urge them thus. Soon, anyone who had stolen down the tenement alley late at night and peeked into the Angelinis' cellar would have seen them: the wives staunchly holding the candles, and the men, fumbling with trowel, level, hammer, brick, and mortar, building and rebuilding trial walls — yes, by the Saints, stealing the art.

Then one day, without so much as a goodbye, the Angelinis left the job. When they returned a few weeks later they took places up on the walls with the bricklayers. It came out that they had gone to Morristown, New Jersey; had started in for a contractor as bricklayers — *bricklayers!* — and had managed to purchase *bona fide* union cards.

The end of the world had come for Tito and Santo Lupo. The members of The Society of the White Button were stunned. Tito and Santo mixed mortar and carried bricks in a trembling rage; while up on the scaffolds the Angelini brothers rode high and mighty, shouting loudly for service from their former comrade-hodcarriers. The Vain and the Dude did not have wit enough to start their new profession among strangers. They chose, instead, to stay with the paesanos and act like newly crowned kings. Annibal grew long sideburns and a Hapsburg mustachio, and Attilio wore a green beaver fedora.

As sure as the sun rises, Concettina got her player piano on the installment plan. Serafina bragged about her brand-new sewing machine and simply had to get her heavy feet into tight, pointed, spike-heeled, patent-leather pumps to show off in the fruit store. The sisters-in-law also bruited it about that the day was not far off when their husbands would go to night school, learn to read and write, and become boss contractors.

The tongues of the paesano women worked like a barber's scissors:

"Concettina probably slept with the foreman so that her husband could become a bricklayer."

"That's the America for you."

"They say the Angelini brothers are costing the contractor a fortune with

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all the mistakes they make on the wall."

"Wait and see. Pride departs on a jackass and returns miserably afoot."

Ill-feeling set in between the Little Godfathers. When Annibal and Attilio appeared in Puzzolenti's saloon, flaunting their newly capped gold teeth and shiny, department-store clothes, Tito and Santo sat apart, glowering. Perhaps the Angelini boys meant no harm. But it remains that the son of a bricklayer must become a bricklayer, and the son of a hodcarrier must always be a hodcarrier . . .

At first, although with bad grace and worse jokes, hodcarriers brought them brick and mortar, but then it got so that Annibal and Attilio shouted in vain for material. The contractor was annoyed and told the Angelinis that they might have to return to their wheelbarrows. Annibal and Attilio saw their glorious new world crumbling. They became hysterical.

"Tito!" bawled Annibal to Lupo his friend. "Bring your barrow of brick to me." Tito did not heed him. Annibal stood there shaking helplessly, his trowel in his hand. He shouted to the other hodcarriers. They too spurned him. Annibal jumped down from the scaffold, shoved Tito from his barrow, and wheeled the bricks to the scaffold. As he hurled bricks upon the scaffold he cursed Tito and his father and mother and brothers and sisters and children and the air he breathed. Tito turned pale and the muscles in his scarred neck twitched violently. Was that the same Annibal whom he had loved from childhood? The paesanos expected Tito to take up his shovel and bash Annibal. The contractor bit his fingers and raised his voice fearfully.

"This bordel-servant is taking the bread from my children!" he cried. "Kill each other — but not on my payroll!"

That night The Society of the White Button gathered to discuss their part in the preparations for the coming Feast of the Blessed Virgin. But a shadow was cast over the meeting by Tito's brooding. Finally Bastian blurted: "I would have eaten Annibal alive if he had done that to me!"

Vincenzo Toothless said he would have taken Annibal by the throat and thrown him down all six floors.

"Angelini would have been cut into pieces if he had pushed me like that from my wheelbarrow," bellowed Nick Loudmouth.

Tito sucked deeply on his Di Nobili, clenched his jaws, and looked to the ceiling. After keeping them in suspense he said: "My boys, the incident will be answered by the White Button."

Thereafter, all kinds of rumors circulated around the Dardanelles concerning the fate of "those who sin against their Godfathers and would tramp us under foot."

On the job, Attilio was made uneasy by the silence of his ex-cronies. In the bricklayers' shanty he revealed to Annibal his anxiety.

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"The White Button," mocked Annibal, "a handful of stinking donkeys whose chariot is the wheelbarrow." He sounded off for the benefit of the hodcarriers: "The clowns had better have their wives sew that button on the seat of their ragged pantaloons."

Too much, too much. The Society had many meetings. Very little was said that one could tack down, but there were frightful gestures and oaths.

"Patience," said Tito, "I will have the 'word' soon. When it comes through you will be called upon."

The paesanos shivered. Although no one could truthfully testify whose wife started it, the gossip had it that on the night of the Feast of the Blessed Virgin, the White Button would strike. As the Feast neared, the tension became unbearable. It was enough to make one want to give one's wife a first-class beating just to blow off steam.

The arrangements for the Feast had been made. The red, white, and green lights and festoons were strung along Central Avenue. The pushcart peddlers from Mulberry Street in New York had arrived and put up canvas canopies and gas lanterns over their wares. The bandstand had been built and decorated, the fireworks planned, and the plaster effigy of the Blessed Virgin in the yard of Saint Rocco's church had been redone with a startling coat of paint.

The night before the Feast, Tito summoned the members to an extraordinary session. The fact of the matter is that no one wanted to show up, but curiosity proved too strong.

After keeping them waiting for hours Tito put a dozen or so white buttons and a single black button on the table.

"The buttons," said Tito in a cool voice, "will be put into a hat. Then in darkness each will pick one. To whom falls the black button . . . to him will the Angelinis be answerable."

Dainty-Dainty felt faint. Bastian swayed. Joe Martell gulped. The Kaiser mumbled that he had the stomach-ache from too many hot peppers. But it was no use. The die was cast. Goodbye, job; farewell, sweet wife and children. All was lost.

Tito ordered the door bolted and guarded. Then he asked for the Kaiser's hat. Ever so slowly he counted out a button for each man, including one black button. When he blew out the candles the paesanos began to sweat. He passed the hat and each man prayed for a white button. The ritual was endless because no one was in a hurry to reach for a button.

"When I light the candles," Tito said at last, "every mother's son will show his button, one by one."

Lips were dry, legs seemed to be made of cork, nerves jumped, and heads reeled. Bastian opened his calloused fist, staring hypnotically at his hand. The saints be praised! A white button!

Every man present wished he were in Bastian's shoes. Then Dainty-Dainty, hardly able to breathe, opened his hand. Tears of joy rose to his eyes

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when he saw, resting in his perspiring palm like a pearl, his white button. Then the Kaiser — white. And white for Joe Martell.

Those who had yet to show their buttons groaned with agonized envy of those who had already escaped. Then it was Loudmouth's turn; then Teodoro Four-Eyes — all white, leaving only the Lupo brothers. Santo was deadly pale, and Tito Seared-Neck stood motionless, his eyes burning. Santo showed his button. It was white. The black button had fallen to the leader!

Immediately the other paesanos became like lions, raging against the brothers Angelini. So those clodhoppers dared to become bricklayers and to demand to be served brick and mortar and to be called Masters.

After they had drunk themselves into soddenness they shook hands firmly with Tito and left for home with their cigars jutting aggressively from their mouths, their hats pulled down far to the side.

Tito remained sitting at the little round table all night, smoking, drinking *grappa*, and thinking, in the flickering light of the candle, of his fate.

The next morning he went home to his tenement flat. He brought out a nickel-plated revolver from the old-world trunk stored under the bed. As he oiled the pistol and sighted down the barrel, his wife Maria prayed to Saint Michael at the votive lamp in the bedroom. Tito's children watched their father in admiration as he loaded the revolver. . . .

The Blessed Virgin sent warm and sunny weather for the occasion. The stout paesano women were out early with their big oilcloth shopping bags, haggling and chattering in the meat markets and fruit stores. The Angelini wives were there calling in shrill voices for the "best" salami and prosciutto, the "best" head of pig, the "best" broccoli, garlic, olive oil, and eggplants. The men, shaven, mustachios brushed, dressed in collar, tie, and the one and only suit, stood about the bandstand in a vacant lot next to the pharmacy, gravely laying out the program for the day.

Promptly at 4 in the afternoon the committee for the Feast, headed by Salamundi the contractor, Domenico, president of the Abruzzean Burial Association, advocate Fusaro from the Italo-American Patriotic Republican club, Bandalone who stood up for the Italian storekeepers of Central Avenue, and Tito, leader of The Society of the White Button, took their places on the bandstand. The rest of the paesanos, a hundred or more, massed around them.

Conductor Papalardo arrived with his musicians; seeing him with his flowing dyed locks, cane, spats, swallowtail coat, striped trousers, high collar, and white tie, no one would ever have taken him for a barber. Advocate Fusaro, fingering constantly his pince-nez, blurted out a speech swollen with such terms as inviolable honor, ideals, glory, love of family, and worship of the Creator. Then, with a crescendo of shrieking and

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cheering, the large red, white, and green Italian flag was unfurled, and the band, with all-out brass, pipes, cymbaline, and drums, cannonaded through the Italian national anthem.

Now was the time to wander up and down the two blocks of the fiesta, greeting friends and relatives and making counter-evil-eye to enemies, displaying marriageable daughters, letting the mouth water to the fragrance of hot pizza, made with mozzarella cheese or with anchovies and tomatoes, smacking one's lips over a suckling "sangwitch" or crusty chick peas baked in hot sand or roast chestnuts, called *castagnas*, or tonguing *gelati* and spumone and tortoni, or getting the diabetes from rich-rich *pasticci* and candies, or gobbling cold watermelon, steaming corn, or filberts on a string. For the lovers of fish there was the pickled periwinkle called *scunghilli*, or squid in saffron, *merluzzo en brodetto*, smoked eels, or clams raw, or mussels and snails done in wine or herbs . . . while the fishmonger chanted a *storiella*. And then there was the vendor doing animal parts over charcoal — lamb's brains in jelly, blood-pie, kidneys wrapped in fat, sausage cased and cooked while one waited, cockscombs fried, or maybe tripe in red sauce. One could suck at thick coffee in tiny cups straight from the *compressa*, or drink brandy in eggnog, meanwhile listening to troubadours in Abruzzean highland dress, singing cantatellas old as the Bible.

Annibal the Vain was tipsy and having a high time with the women, patting them familiarly, treating them to goodies as if he had no end of money, winking and telling bawdy tales, and even joking about the days when he was a lowly hodcarrier.

Tito nodded to himself. So this is what became of a Godfather in the America!

Padre Benedetto superintended the adornment of the Blessed Virgin. Contractor Salamundi was permitted to drape over her the new robe he had donated, a dazzling work of blue and gold silk. On her brow was placed the rhinestone and imitation gold diadem. Large rings were slipped onto her fingers and a shining sceptre put in her hand.

Confusion and inefficiency as always, but in the end the processional candelaria was ready. The electric street-lights were dimmed. Papalardo mustered his music-makers. Then came the arguments about places in the order of parade.

The moment for starting came at last. The band began playing the *Ave Maria* and moved slowly up Central Avenue, trailed by the long line of adorants, four abreast, all carrying lighted candles.

In front of Puzzolenti's saloon on the corner opposite Saint Rocco's, Tito awaited the coming of the float of the Blessed Virgin, borne aloft by Annibal, Attilio, and a few others.

As they approached, Tito, moving very deliberately, pulled the nickel-plated revolver from his coat pocket. No one cried out or attempted to stop him. The flash of the weapon

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seemed to fascinate those who saw it.

But a low swift whisper that Tito was about to kill his Godfathers ran through the processional of the Candelaria. Padre Benedetto turned his eyes away from Tito's pistol and walked faster. Annibal and Attilio looked around helplessly. Their feet dragged under the weight of the Blessed Virgin, and beads of sweat covered their faces. Why didn't the paesanos restrain Tito? Could a man kill his own Godfather? What kind of a world was the America?

As Tito raised his revolver, Annibal's woman burst out of her stupor and shrieked: "Husband, flee!"

Annibal and Attilio let go the Blessed Virgin and dashed for the sanctuary of the church. Tito dropped to one knee, aimed slowly, and fired. The bullet missed. The Angelini brothers stopped and turned to look back, and in that instant Tito's second bullet struck Annibal. Blood spurted out of Annibal's forehead.

He gurgled and collapsed in his brother's arms.

Bastian, standing with lighted taper in the lot behind the bandstand, mistook the shots for the signal to begin the fireworks, and zealously set off a bombardment that got out of control and whizzed crazily in every direction. Men, women, and children scurried for their lives. With her sniveling brood following, Concettina ran to Annibal's side and threw herself on his body, screaming: "Husband! You're dead! You've been made bloody and cold with holes in your head because of envy! Envy has destroyed the home of Annibal Angelini!"

Padre Benedetto, recovering from fright, hastily pronounced extreme unction for the flown spirit of Annibal. The paesano women, clustering around, raised their voices in competition with the pitched keening of the freshly widowed Concettina.

Tito, duty accomplished, his face tight, walked away unmolested. Others, fleeing from the fireworks, crashed through pushcarts and store windows. Hundreds of gay rockets looped with swishing streams of sparks over the tenements, bringing on a salvo of explosions and setting fire to several roofs, including the dome of Saint Rocco's. Above the cries of *Murder! Assassin! Fire! Lord save my children!* rose the clang of ambulances and police wagons, and the sirens of fire trucks.

After the funeral of Annibal, which was quite a success, Attilio and his family packed themselves off to Baltimore, where, it is said, Attilio stubbornly resumed bricklaying.

In court, no hodcarrier paesano would speak against Tito Lupo. But Tito could not convince hardheaded, ignorant Americans that though he had shot and killed Annibal Angelini, he had done no wrong. His bewilderment was complete when the jury failed to understand that a hodcarrier had no leave to become a bricklayer. And it pleased the American legal system to disrespect ancient traditions and send Tito to jail for twenty years.

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So far as we know, only two Lord Peter Wimsey short stories are not included in any of Dorothy L. Sayers's three volumes of shorts — LORD PETER VIEWS THE BODY (*1928*), HANGMAN'S HOLIDAY (*1933*), *and* IN THE TEETH OF THE EVIDENCE (*1939*). *One is "The Haunted Policeman," which we brought to you in our issue of May 1952. The other is "Striding Folly" — the "last" of the Lord Peter Wimsey shorts until Miss Sayers elects to return to her detective haunts and habits . . .*

STRIDING FOLLY

by DOROTHY L. SAYERS

"SHALL I EXPECT YOU NEXT WEDNESday for our game as usual?" asked Mr. Mellilow.

"Of course, of course," replied Mr. Creech. "Very glad there's no ill feeling, Mellilow. Next Wednesday as usual. Unless . . ." His heavy face darkened for a moment, as though at some disagreeable recollection. "There may be a man coming to see me. If I'm not here by 9, don't expect me. In that case, I'll come on Thursday."

Mr. Mellilow let his visitor out through the French window and watched him across the lawn to the wicket-gate leading to the Hall grounds. It was a clear October night, with a gibbous moon going down the sky. Mr. Mellilow slipped on his galoshes (for he was careful of his health and the grass was wet) and himself went down past the sundial and the fish-pond and through the sunk garden till he came to the fence that bounded his tiny freehold on the southern side. He leaned his arms on the rail and gazed across the little valley at the tumbling river and the wide slope beyond, which was crowned, at a mile's distance, by the ridiculous stone tower known as the Folly. The valley, the slope, and the tower all belonged to Striding Hall. They lay there, peaceful and lovely in the moonlight, as though nothing could ever disturb their fantastic solitude. But Mr. Mellilow knew better.

He had bought the cottage to end his days in, thinking that here was a corner of England the same yesterday, today, and forever. It was strange that he, a chess player, should not have been able to see three moves ahead. The first move had been the death of the old squire. The second had been the purchase by Creech of the whole Striding property. Even then, he had not been able to see why a rich businessman — unmarried and with no rural interests — should have

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come to live in a spot so remote. True, there were three considerable towns at a few miles' distance, but the village itself was on the road to nowhere. Fool! he had forgotten the Grid! It had come, like a great, ugly chess-rook swooping from an unconsidered corner, marching over the country, straddling four, six, eight parishes at a time, planting hideous pylons to mark its progress, and squatting now at Mr. Mellilow's very door.

For Creech had just calmly announced that he was selling the valley to the Electrical Company; and there would be a huge power-plant on the river and workmen's bungalows on the slope, and then Development — which, to Mr. Mellilow, was another name for the devil. It was ironical that Mr. Mellilow, alone in the village, had received Creech with kindness, excusing his vulgar humor and insensitive manners, because he thought Creech was lonely and believed him to be well-meaning, and because he was glad to have the kind of neighbor who could give him a weekly game of chess.

Mr. Mellilow came in sorrowful, and restored his galoshes to their usual resting place on the veranda by the French window. He put the chessmen away and the cat out and locked up the cottage — for he lived quite alone, with a woman coming in by the day.

Then he went up to bed with his mind full of the Folly, and presently he fell asleep and dreamed.

He was standing in a landscape whose style seemed very familiar to him. There was a wide plain, intersected with hedgerows, and crossed in the middle distance by a river, over which was a small stone bridge. Enormous blue-black thunderclouds hung heavy overhead, and the air had the electric stillness of something stretched to snapping-point. Far off, beyond the river, a livid streak of sunlight pierced the clouds and lit up with theatrical brilliance a tall, solitary tower. The scene had a curious unreality, as though of painted canvas. It was a picture, and he had an odd conviction that he recognized the handling and could put a name to the artist. "Smooth and tight," were the words that occurred to him. And then, "It's bound to break before long." And then, "I ought not to have come out without my galoshes."

It was important, it was imperative that he should get to the bridge. But the faster he walked, the greater the distance grew, and without his galoshes the going was very difficult. Sometimes he was bogged to the knee, sometimes he floundered on steep banks of shifting shale; and the air was not merely oppressive — it was *hot* like the inside of an oven. He was running now, with the breath laboring in his throat, and when he looked up he was astonished to see how close he was to the tower. The bridge was fantastically small, dwindled to a pinpoint on the horizon, but the tower fronted him just across the river, and close on his right was a dark wood,

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which had not been there before.

Something flickered on the wood's edge, out and in again, shy and swift as a rabbit; and now the wood was between him and the bridge, and the tower behind it, still glowing in that unnatural streak of sunlight. He was at the river's brink, but the bridge was nowhere to be seen — and the tower, the tower was moving. It had crossed the river. It had taken the wood in one gigantic leap. It was no more than 50 yards off, immensely high, shining, and painted. Even as he ran, dodging and twisting, it took another field in its stride, and when he turned to flee it was there before him. It was a double tower — twin towers — a tower and its mirror image, advancing with a swift and awful stealth from either side to crush him. He was pinned now between them, panting. He saw their smooth, yellow sides tapering up to heaven, and about their feet went a monstrous stir, like the quiver of a crouching cat.

Then the low sky burst like a sluice and through the drench of the rain he leaped at a doorway in the foot of the tower before him and found himself climbing the familiar stair of Striding Folly. "My galoshes will be here," he said, with a passionate sense of relief. The lightning stabbed suddenly through a loophole and he saw a black crow lying dead upon the stairs. Then thunder . . . like the rolling of drums . . .

Mr. Mellilow, finishing his supper on the following Wednesday, rather hoped that Mr. Creech would not come. He had thought a good deal during the week about the electric-power scheme, and the more he thought about it, the less he liked it. He had discovered another thing which had increased his dislike. Sir Henry Hunter, who owned a good deal of land on the other side of the market town, had, it appeared, offered the company a site more suitable than Striding in every way and on extremely favorable terms. The choice of Striding seemed inexplicable, unless on the supposition that Creech had bribed the surveyor. Sir Henry voiced his suspicions without any mincing of words. He admitted, however, that he could prove nothing.

"But he's crooked," he said. "I have heard things about him in Town. Other things. Ugly rumors."

Mr. Mellilow suggested that the deal might not, after all, go through.

"You're an optimist," said Sir Henry. "Nothing stops a fellow like Creech. Except death. He's a man with enemies. . . ." He broke off, adding darkly: "Let's hope he breaks his neck one of these days — and the sooner the better."

Mr. Mellilow was uncomfortable. He did not like to hear about crooked transactions. Businessmen, he supposed, were like that; but if they were, he would rather not play games with them. It spoiled things, somehow. Better, perhaps, not to think too much about it. He took up the newspaper, determined to occupy his mind, while waiting for Creech, with

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that day's chess problem. White to play and mate in three.

He had just become pleasantly absorbed when a knock came at the front door. Creech? As early as 8 o'clock? Surely not. And in any case, he would have come by the lawn and the French window. But who else would visit the cottage of an evening? Rather disconcerted, he rose to let the visitor in. But the man who stood on the threshold was a stranger.

"Mr. Mellilow?"

"Yes, my name is Mellilow. What can I do for you?"

(A motorist, he supposed, inquiring his way or wanting to borrow something.)

"Ah! that is good. I have come to play chess with you."

"To play chess?" repeated Mr. Mellilow, astonished.

"Yes; I am a commercial traveler. My car has broken down in the village. I have to stay at the inn, and I ask the good Potts if there is anyone who can give me a game of chess to pass the evening. He tells me Mr. Mellilow lives here and plays well. Indeed, I recognize the name. Have I not read *Mellilow on Pawn-Play?* It is yours, no?"

Rather flattered, Mr. Mellilow admitted the authorship of this little work.

"So. I congratulate you. And you will do me the favor to play with me, hey? Unless I intrude, or you have company."

"No," said Mr. Mellilow. "I am more or less expecting a friend, but he won't turn up till 9 and perhaps he won't come at all."

"If he come, I go," said the stranger. "It is very good of you." He had somehow oozed his way into the house without any direct invitation and was removing his hat and overcoat. He was a big man with a short, thick, curly beard and tinted spectacles, and he spoke in a deep voice with a slight foreign accent. "My name," he added, "is Czorny. I represent Messrs. Carter & Grandee of Farringdon Street, the manufacturers of electrical fittings."

He grinned widely, and Mr. Mellilow's heart contracted. Such haste seemed almost indecent. Before the site was even taken! He felt an unreasonable resentment against this harmless man. Then he rebuked himself. It was not the man's fault. "Come in," he said, with more cordiality in his voice than he really felt, "I shall be very glad to give you a game."

"I am very grateful," said Mr. Czorny, squeezing his great bulk through into the sitting-room. "Ha! you are working out the *Record's* three-mover. It is elegant but not profound. You will not take long to break his back. You permit that I disturb?"

Mr. Mellilow nodded, and the stranger began to arrange the board for play.

"You have hurt your hand?" inquired Mr. Mellilow.

"It is nothing," replied Mr. Czorny, turning back the glove he wore and displaying a quantity of sticking-plaster. "I break my knuckles

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trying to start the car. She kick me. Bah! A trifle. I wear a glove to protect him. So, we begin?"

"Won't you have something to drink first?"

"No, no, thank you very much. I have refreshed myself already at the inn. Too many drinks are not good. But do not let that prevent you."

Mr. Mellilow helped himself to a modest whiskey and soda and sat down to the board. He won the draw and took the white pieces, playing his king's pawn to king's fourth.

"So!" said Mr. Czorny, as the next few moves and counter-moves followed their prescribed course, "the *giuoco piano*, hey? Nothing spectacular. We try the strength. When we know what we have each to meet, then the surprises will begin."

The first game proceeded cautiously. Whoever Mr. Czorny might be, he was a sound and intelligent player, not easily stampeded into indiscretions. Twice Mr. Mellilow baited a delicate trap; twice, with a broad smile, Mr. Czorny stepped daintily out between the closing jaws. The third trap was set more carefully. Gradually, and fighting every step of the way, black was forced behind his last defenses. Yet another five minutes, and Mr. Mellilow said gently: "Check"; adding, "and mate in four." Mr. Czorny nodded. "That was good." He glanced at the clock. "One hour. You give me my revenge, hey? Now we know one another. Now we shall see."

Mr. Mellilow agreed. Ten minutes past 9. Creech would not come now. The pieces were set up again. This time, Mr. Czorny took white, opening with the difficult and dangerous Steinitz gambit. Within a few minutes Mr. Mellilow realized that, up till now, his opponent had been playing with him in a double sense. He experienced that eager and palpitating excitement which attends the process of biting off more than one can chew. By half-past 9, he was definitely on the defensive; at a quarter to 10, he thought he spied a way out; five minutes later, Mr. Czorny said, suddenly, "It grows late: we must begin to push a little," and thrust forward a knight, leaving his qu[illegible]n *en prise*.

Mr. Mellilow took prompt advantage of the oversight — and became aware, too late, that he was menaced by the advance of a white rook.

Stupid! How had he come to overlook that? There was an answer, of course . . . but he wished the little room were not so hot and that the stranger's eyes were not so inscrutable behind the tinted glasses. If he could maneuvre his king out of harm's way for the moment and force his pawn through, he had still a chance. The rook moved in upon him as he twisted and dodged; it came swooping and striding over the board, four, six, eight squares at a time; and now the second white rook had darted out from its corner; they were closing in upon him — a double castle, twin castles, a castle and its mirror image: oh Lord, it was his dream of striding

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towers, smooth and yellow and painted. Mr. Mellilow wiped his forehead.

"Check!" said Mr. Czorny. And again, "Check!" And then, "Check mate!"

Mr. Mellilow pulled himself together. This would never do. His heart was thumping as though he had been running a race. It was ridiculous to be so much overwrought by a game of chess, and if there was one kind of man in the world that he despised, it was a bad loser. The stranger was uttering some polite commonplace — he could not tell what — and replacing the pieces in their box.

"I must go now," said Mr. Czorny. "I thank you very much for the pleasure you have so kindly given me. . . . Pardon me, you are a little unwell?"

"No, no," said Mr. Mellilow. "It is the heat of the fire and the lamp. I have enjoyed our games very much. Won't you take anything before you go?"

"No, I thank you. I must be back before the good Potts locks me out. Again, my hearty thanks."

He grasped Mr. Mellilow's hand in his gloved grip and strode quickly into the hall. In another moment he had seized hat and coat and was gone. His footsteps died away along the cobbled path.

Mr. Mellilow returned to the sitting-room. A curious episode; he could scarcely believe that it had really happened. There lay the empty board, the pieces in their box, the *Record* on the old oak chest with a solitary tumbler beside it; he might have dozed off and dreamed the whole thing, for all the trace the stranger's visit had left. Certainly the room was very hot. He threw the French window open. A lopsided moon had risen, checkering the valley and the slope beyond with patches of black and white. High up, and distant, the Folly made a pale streak upon the sky. Mr. Mellilow thought he would walk down to the bridge to clear his head. He groped in the accustomed corner for his galoshes. They were not there. "Where on earth has that woman put them?" muttered Mr. Mellilow. And he answered himself, irrationally but with complete conviction, "My galoshes are left up at the Folly."

His feet seemed to move of their own accord. He was through the garden now, walking quickly down the field to the little wooden footbridge. His galoshes were at the Folly. It was imperative that he should fetch them back; the smallest delay would be fatal. "This is ridiculous," thought Mr. Mellilow to himself. "It is that foolish dream running in my head. Mrs. Gibbs must have taken them away to clean them. But while I am here, I may as well go on; the walk will do me good."

The power of the dream was so strong upon him that he was almost surprised to find the bridge in its accustomed place. He put his hand on the rail and was comforted by the roughness of the untrimmed bark.

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Half a mile uphill now to the Folly. Its smooth sides shone in the moonlight, and he turned suddenly, expecting to see the double image striding the fields behind him. Nothing so sensational was to be seen, however. He breasted the slope with renewed courage. Now he stood close beneath the tower — and with a little shock he saw that the door at its base stood open.

He stepped inside, and immediately the darkness was all about him like a blanket. He felt with his foot for the stair and groped his way up between the newel and the wall. Now in gloom, now in the gleam of a loophole, the spiral seemed to turn endlessly. Then, as his head rose into the pale glimmer of the fourth window, he saw a shapeless blackness sprawled upon the stair. With a sudden dreadful certainty that *this* was what he had come to see, he mounted further and stooped over it. Creech was lying there, dead. Close beside the body lay a pair of galoshes. As Mr. Mellilow moved to pick them up, something rolled beneath his foot. It was a white chess-rook. . . .

The police-surgeon said that Creech had been dead since about 9 o'clock. It was proved that at 8:50 he had set out towards the wicket-gate to play chess with Mr. Mellilow. And in the morning light the prints of Mr. Mellilow's galoshes were clear, leading down the graveled path on the far side of the lawn, past the sundial and the fish-pond, and through the sunk garden and so over the muddy field and the footbridge, and up the slope to the Folly. Deep footprints they were, and close together, such as a man might make who carried a monstrous burden. A good mile to the Folly and half of it uphill. The doctor looked inquiringly at Mr. Mellilow's spare form.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Mellilow. "I could have carried him. It's a matter of knack, not strength. You see" — he blushed faintly — "I'm not really a gentleman. My father was a miller and I spent my whole boyhood carrying sacks. Only I was always fond of my books, and so I managed to educate myself and earn a little money. It would be silly to pretend I couldn't have carried Creech. But I didn't do it, of course."

"It's unfortunate," said the Superintendent, "that we can't find no trace of this man Czorny." His voice was the most unpleasant Mr. Mellilow had ever heard — a skeptical voice with an edge like a saw. "He never come down to the Feathers, that's a certainty. Potts never set eyes on him, let alone sent him up here with a tale about chess. Nor nobody saw no car neither. An odd gentleman this Mr. Czorny seems to have been. No footmarks to the front door? Well, it's cobbles, so you wouldn't expect none. That his glass of whiskey by any chance, sir? . . . Oh? he wouldn't have a drink, wouldn't he? Ah! And you played two games of chess in this very room? Ah! very absorbing pursoot, so I'm told. You didn't hear poor Mr. Creech come up

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the garden last night, did you?"

"The window was shut," said Mr. Mellilow, "and the curtains drawn. And Mr. Creech always walked straight over the grass from the wicket-gate."

"H'm!" said the Superintendent. "So he comes, or somebody comes, right up onto the veranda and sneaks a pair of galoshes; and you and this Mr. Czorny are so occupied you don't hear nothing."

"Come, Superintendent," said the Chief Constable, who was sitting on Mr. Mellilow's oak chest and looked rather uncomfortable. "I don't think that's impossible. The man might have worn tennis shoes or something. How about fingerprints on the chessmen?"

"He wore a glove on his right hand," said Mr. Mellilow unhappily. "I remember that he didn't use his left hand at all — not even when taking a piece."

"A very remarkable gentleman," said the Superintendent again. "No fingerprints, no footprints, no drinks, no eyes visible, no features to speak of, pops in and out without leaving no trace — a kind of vanishing gentleman." Mr. Mellilow made a helpless gesture. "These the chessmen you was using?" Mr. Mellilow nodded, and the Superintendent turned the box upside-down upon the board, carefully extending a vast enclosing paw to keep the pieces from rolling away. "Let's see. Two big 'uns with crosses on the top and two big 'uns with spikes. Four chaps with split-open 'eads. Four 'orses. Two black 'uns — what d'you call these? Rooks, eh? Look more like churches to me. One white church — rook if you like. What's gone with the other one? Or don't these rook-affairs go in pairs like the rest?"

"They must be both there," said Mr. Mellilow. "He was using two white rooks in the end-game. He mated me with them — I remember. . . ."

He remembered only too well. The dream and the double castle moving to crush him. He watched the Superintendent feeling in his pocket and suddenly knew the name of the terror that had flickered in and out of the black wood.

The Superintendent set down the white rook that had lain by the corpse at the Folly. Color, height, and weight matched with the rook on the board.

"Staunton men," said the Chief Constable, "all of a pattern."

But the Superintendent, with his back to the French window, was watching Mr. Mellilow's gray face.

"He must have put it in his pocket," said Mr. Mellilow. "He cleared the pieces away at the end of the game."

"But he couldn't have taken it up to Striding Folly," said the Superintendent, "nor he couldn't have done the murder, by your own account."

"Is it possible that you carried it up to the Folly yourself," asked the Chief Constable, "and dropped it there when you found the body?"

"The gentleman has said that he

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saw this man Czorny put it away," said the Superintendent.

They were watching him now, all of them. Mr. Mellilow clasped his head in his hands. His forehead was drenched. "Something must break soon," he thought.

Like a thunderclap there came a blow on the window; the Superintendent leaped nearly out of his skin.

"Lord, my lord!" he complained, opening the window and letting a gust of fresh air into the room, "how you startled me!"

Mr. Mellilow gasped. Who was this? His brain wasn't working properly. That friend of the Chief Constable's, of course, who had disappeared somehow during the conversation. Like the bridge in his dream. Disappeared. Gone out of the picture.

"Absorbin' game, detectin'," said the Chief Constable's friend. "Very much like chess. People come creepin' right up onto the veranda and you never even notice them. In broad daylight, too. Tell me, Mr. Mellilow — what made you go up last night to the Folly?"

Mr. Mellilow hesitated. This was the point in his story that he had made no attempt to explain. Mr. Czorny had sounded unlikely enough; a dream about galoshes would sound more unlikely still.

"Come now," said the Chief Constable's friend, polishing his monocle on his handkerchief and replacing it with an exaggerated lifting of the eyebrows. "What was it? Woman, woman, lovely woman? Meet me by moonlight and all that kind of thing?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Mellilow indignantly. "I wanted a breath of fresh ——" He stopped, uncertainly. There was something in the other man's childish-foolish face that urged him to speak the reckless truth. "I had a dream," he said.

The Superintendent shuffled his feet, and the Chief Constable crossed one leg awkwardly over the other.

"Warned of God in a dream," said the man with the monocle, unexpectedly. "What did you dream of?" He followed Mr. Mellilow's glance at the board. "Chess?"

"Of two moving castles," said Mr. Mellilow, "and the dead body of a black crow."

"A pretty piece of fused and inverted symbolism," said the other. "The dead body of a black crow becomes a dead man with a white rook."

"But that came afterwards," said the Chief Constable.

"So did the end-game with the two rooks," said Mr. Mellilow.

"Our friend's memory works both ways," said the man with the monocle, "like the White Queen's. She, by the way, could believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. So can I. Pharaoh, tell your dream."

"Time's getting on, Wimsey," said the Chief Constable.

"Let time pass," retorted the other, "for, as a great chess-player observed, it helps more than reasoning."

"What player was that?" demanded Mr. Mellilow.

"A lady," said Lord Peter Wimsey,

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"who played with living men and mated kings, popes, and emperors."

"Oh," said Mr. Mellilow. "Well ——" He told his tale from the beginning, making no secret of his grudge against Creech and his nightmare fancy of the striding electric pylons. "I think," he said, "that was what gave me the dream." And he went on to his story of the galoshes, the bridge, the moving towers, and death on the stairs at the Folly.

"An exceedingly lucky dream for you," said Wimsey. "But I see now why they chose you. Look! It is all clear as daylight. If you had had no dream — if the murderer had been able to come back later and replace your galoshes — if someone else had found the body in the morning with the chess-rook beside it and your tracks leading back and home again, that might have been mate in one move. There are two men to look for, Superintendent. One of them belongs to Creech's household, for he knew that Creech came every Wednesday through the wicket-gate to play chess with you; and he knew that Creech's chessmen and yours were twin sets. The other was a stranger — probably the man whom Creech half-expected to call upon him. One lay in wait for Creech and strangled him near the wicket-gate as he arrived; fetched your galoshes from the veranda, and carried the body down to the Folly. And the other came here in disguise to hold you in play and give you an alibi that no one could believe. The one man is strong in his hands and strong in the back — a sturdy, stocky man with feet no bigger than yours. The other is a big man, with noticeable eyes and probably clean-shaven, and he plays brilliant chess. Look among Creech's enemies for those two men and ask them where they were between 8 o'clock and 10:30 last night."

"Why didn't the strangler bring back the galoshes?" asked the Chief Constable.

"Ah!" said Wimsey; "that was where the plan went wrong. I think he waited up at the Folly to see the light

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go out in the cottage. He thought it would be too great a risk to come up twice onto the veranda while Mr. Mellilow was there."

"Do you mean," asked Mr. Mellilow, "that he was there, *in* the Folly, watching me, when I was groping up those black stairs?"

"He may have been," said Wimsey. "But probably, when he saw you coming up the slope, he knew that things had gone wrong and fled away in the opposite direction, to the high road that runs behind the Folly. Mr. Czorny, of course, went, as he came, by the road that passes Mr. Mellilow's door, removing his disguise in the nearest convenient place."

"That's all very well, my lord," said the Superintendent, "but where's the proof of it?"

"Everywhere," said Wimsey. "Go and look at the tracks again. There's one set going outwards in galoshes, deep and short, made when the body was carried down. One made later, in walking shoes, which is Mr. Mellilow's track going outwards towards the Folly. And the third is Mr. Mellilow again, coming back, the track of a man running very fast. Two out and only one in. Where is the man who went out and never came back?"

"Yes," said the Superintendent doggedly. "But suppose Mr. Mellilow made that second lot of tracks himself to put us off the scent, like? I'm not saying he did, mind you, but why couldn't he have?"

"Because," said Wimsey, "he had no time. The in-and-out tracks left by the shoes were made *after* the body was carried down. There is no other bridge for three miles on either side, and the river runs waist-deep. It can't be forded; so it must be crossed by the bridge. But at half-past 10 Mr. Mellilow was in the Feathers, on *this* side of the river, ringing up the police. It couldn't be done, Super, unless he had wings. The bridge is there to prove it; for the bridge was crossed three times only."

"The bridge," said Mr. Mellilow, with a great sigh. "I knew in my dream there was something important about that. I knew I was safe if only I could get to the bridge."

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WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

THE CRAZY HOUSE

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

YOU HAVE PROBABLY HEARD OF THE house — you may even have visited it. Perhaps you were shown around by Florian Cooke himself — a little man, very neatly dressed, with spectacles and thinning hair and a soft gentle voice. All the visitors liked Florian Cooke. When they went back to their cars, they were apt to say: "That's a nice little guy. He actually seemed glad to see us."

He was glad — very glad. He was glad every minute there was a stranger in the house, and he made the tours last as long as possible. Because, when he was alone again, he lived in a constant state of fear. Actually he was afraid of the house; he was afraid to be alone in it; he was more afraid after he knew that he was no longer alone.

For 28 years Florian Cooke had been a clerk in a lawyer's office. He remembered with nostalgia the long, monotonous, busy days, the quiet evenings at Mrs. Tulloch's boarding house; the city itself, eight miles away, with its streets and stores and theaters and people. Here he was, with no neighbors, half a mile from the highway, face to face with a growing fear that was becoming panic-terror. In the summer it had not been so bad; but now it was winter, and on some days there were no visitors at all. It meant practically no income, since he was paid half the entrance fee; but that was not the worst. It was not seeing anybody, not talking to anybody but himself, starting from his light sleep a dozen times a night, straining his ears to catch sounds that he prayed vainly would not be real.

But he dared not leave the house — "the crazy house," as so many of the visitors called it. The only alternative was starvation. At his age he could never get another job, and he was still some years short of the old-age pension. He had to stay.

He remembered so clearly how it all began. The boss had sent for him to come to his private office, and he had had a faint hope that something good was going to happen, since he was sure there could be no complaint about his work. At the first words his spirits soared.

"Come in, Cooke, I want to talk to you. Let me see: you've been with us a good many years now, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir, 28 years on April 10."

"Hmm." Florian Cooke's heart fell. "Well, Cooke, you ought to know me pretty well by now — ha, ha! I'm a frank man. Here's the blunt truth — you're growing too old for the work."

I'm younger than you are, thought

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Cooke bitterly. But of course that didn't count. Aloud he said: "Haven't I handled everything all right, sir?"

"So far, Cooke, yes — though you're slowing up. But a man of your age can't keep up the pace set by the younger fellows. The best thing to do is to face the facts. We carry a pretty heavy load here, and it needs young blood. I'm afraid we'll have to get a younger man to take your place."

Cooke was speechless with dismay. The boss smiled benevolently.

"Now, I know what you're thinking, Cooke — the old skinflint, he's turning me out in the cold. Nothing of the sort. I've got another job for you — something just right for you, the way things are now. You remember the Lawrence case?"

"Yes, sir — old Judge Lawrence and that strange house he built." Cooke's undependable heart was fluttering with a strange mixture of relief and apprehension.

"Precisely. Well, as you know, I represent the heirs. I've had a conference with them and they've accepted my recommendations. They all have plenty of money of their own, besides what they'll collect from the estate — so the house means nothing to them. Torn down, the materials would be worth hardly anything, and the land has no great value unless the city grows out that way some day.

"So I suggested that they turn the place into a tourist attraction. After all, it's the only externalization on earth of the thought-processes of a lunatic. We'll let it stand till it's worth more some other way, and meanwhile I'm authorized to offer you the job of — shall we call it curator? You'd live there rent-free, of course, and keep half the entrance fees. We'll put on a real advertising campaign, with a billboard on the highway, and the project ought to coin money. Well, what do you say?"

"But I've never — I'd rather —" The words died feebly. He wasn't going to keep his old job by declining this one, and he'd never made enough to have any savings worth talking about. He managed one defensive squeak. "But Mr. Pryor, sir, wouldn't he be the logical —?"

"Pryor," snapped the boss, "has not only made himself quite ineligible by his conduct since the judge's death, but at present he has completely disappeared. I wouldn't trust him, anyway, in an accounting of the receipts. He'd be quite capable of falsifying the number of visitors and pocketing more than his share. Now you, Cooke — as I told the heirs yesterday, I can depend entirely on your honesty."

And what an inspired way to get rid of an old clerk and hire a still cheaper new one, thought Florian Cooke drearily. But he only nodded miserably. He knew he had to accept the offer.

So here he was — eight months of it now. The first time he had viewed the incredible house he had been terrified by it, and familiarity made it worse, not better. Mingled with his terror was an uneasy guilt; he had tried, but couldn't he have tried

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harder to get the job for James Pryor? It really belonged to him; this monstrosity had been his home for almost as long as Cooke had been a lawyer's clerk.

Judge Frederick Lawrence had been immensely wealthy — not from his profession but by inheritance and marriage. After his wife died, leaving him another fortune, and when he had reached the years which pass from middle to old age, it became apparent that his mind was failing rapidly. He had resigned his judgeship, so there was nothing that needed to be done about that. And though in a few years his queerness obviously grew to actual insanity, he was too rich for any talk of commitment so long as he displayed no signs of violence — which he never did. His nearest relatives were distant cousins, who had no legal right either to have him committed or to ask for appointment of a guardian. And the old judge continued to be perfectly competent in financial matters, and handled his money as shrewdly and efficiently as ever. What he did was to devote his whole time to the building of a house which would propitiate the spirits of the men he had condemned to die — for that was the final form which his delusions took.

The house was still in process when he died — it would never be finished. Even so, it contained more than 200 rooms. Everything possible in it had thirteen parts — thirteen steps in every staircase, thirteen lights in the chandeliers, thirteen panes in the windows, thirteen kinds of parquetry in every floor. But all that was not the salient point about the judge's weird house. Somehow he got it into his confused head that the way to keep the spirits away was to baffle them, to make it impossible for them to find the hidden suite in which he lived his own private life. Therefore the house was full of staircases that led nowhere, of windows that opened on blank walls, of steps so steep a tall man could not mount them and other steps so shallow a child would stumble on them, of chimneys (thirteen of them) which connected with no flue and no fireplace, of rooms without doors and doors without rooms, of peepholes and listening-tubes, all in a maze of *cul-de-sacs*. The whole was surrounded by a high, impenetrable fence, on the padlocked gate of which was fixed a great bell, which in the judge's day rang every morning just before dawn to remind the ghosts that they must return to their graves.

This was the house in which Florian Cooke, a timid little elderly man, was condemned to live alone. He was far too much afraid of it ever to have explored it all, and he was so easily lost that he had asked the man whom the owners sent monthly to clean and wash windows in the twenty rooms on display, to paint white lines with arrows on the floors, so that he and his tourists could find their way safely back to the starting-point. He himself holed up in two rooms at the back of the ground floor, part of what had originally been the servants'

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quarters — almost the only normal part of the house, because servants had been reluctant enough to stay there, and the spirits wouldn't be after them, anyway.

During the 25 years or more that Judge Lawrence was building his house, James Pryor had lived with him as, ostensibly, his secretary. Actually he was semi-guardian, male nurse, and manager of the household and of the large staff necessary to keep such a place in good order.

The years of close association with a madman, in such an environment, had left their marks on James Pryor as well. Pryor was a man of good mind, but most unfortunate physically; his face was disfigured by a large red birthmark, and one of his legs was congenitally shorter than the other, so that he limped badly. He was an orphan without brothers or sisters, and his afflictions had made him reticent and seclusive. He had jumped at the chance to get away from a world he hated because he could never play a normal part in it. Gradually the judge grew madder, but Pryor clung to his hermitage. He seldom left the house and he had no friends. He had a suite of his own next to the judge's — though he had to consent to a double wall between them so that any spirits who happened on Pryor's rooms would not be able to reach Judge Lawrence's.

He had taken it for granted — from hundreds of hints and half-promises that he was sure were valid — that he would be left enough money to enable him to live, for he had saved little and was by this time completely unfit for any occupation and utterly unable to associate with other human beings. Instead, Lawrence died intestate.

Shocked and horrified, Pryor had hurried to the judge's attorney. His outmoded clothes, his disfigured face, his wild eyes and almost incoherent speech, had antagonized the lawyer at once. Pryor was curtly informed that he had no claim on the estate, that it was up to him to look after himself, and that he should get out of the office and stay out. Instead, he kept haunting it, until the lawyer had sent Cooke to tell him that if he came again the police would be called. It was the only time the two men had met.

Then Pryor disappeared. Perhaps he had committed suicide, though no one found his body. Nobody knew and nobody cared.

Except Florian Cooke.

Cowering in his bed at night, in a corner of the strange, towering house, hearing loose boards creak and mice slithering in the walls, Cooke thought of that distraught, dreadful face, and shivered. Pryor would have lived on here contentedly, steeling himself to meet and talk to visitors; he had a moral and almost a legal right to the opportunity. Instead, it had been forced on a man who dreaded every hour of it.

In the morning Cooke usually escaped for a while. He had dug a little garden under his windows where in spring and summer he raised a few vegetables. The rest of his food he

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bought in the city. Almost every morning he walked the half mile to the highway and another quarter of a mile to the bus stop. Once a month he called on the lawyer and went over the accounts with him. He always had to take a bus back that allowed him to reach the house by noon, even on days when it was unlikely that any visitors would come.

Through the afternoon, even if no one appeared, he could keep up his courage by expectation, by hanging around the front entrance (the gate in the fence was of course kept open during visiting hours), watching and listening for cars. But sooner or later, and increasingly early as autumn began, darkness came. When the closing hour arrived, Cooke hastened to padlock the gate, then to make sure that all the many doors leading into the house were fastened securely. Then he hid himself in his own two rear rooms and nothing short of fire would have brought him out of them till morning. The water and gas had been left on in the house, but the electricity had been turned off, and he had to use oil-lamps.

There were things he could do to keep busy. He could set traps for the mice and sprinkle powder around the baseboards for the roaches, so that the pests would stay out of his premises no matter how numerously they infested the rest of the house. He had magazines and newspapers to read that he had brought from the city, or he could play solitaire. He had a little battery radio, but after a few months he seldom turned it on, because the silence was so appalling when he tuned out again. He hardly ever had a letter to write, since he received very few, and these only at the lawyer's office when he called once a month. Mostly he read, in a desultory fashion, or worked on crossword puzzles, smoking his pipe until he began hopefully to feel some slight approach of drowsiness. Then as expeditiously as possible he got into bed. But it was a long struggle every night to fall asleep. After a while he began leaving his lamp on, turned low. He had reverted to childhood: he was afraid of the dark.

He lay thus one night in December, almost asleep and then starting awake at some sudden half-imagined sound — a car faintly heard on the highway, a rattling window, a loose curtain blowing — when abruptly he found himself wide-awake, sitting upright, with cold sweat on his forehead.

Far off, over his head, he had heard a footstep.

Florian Cooke sat trembling, not daring to breathe, until his ears rang from the effort of listening. There was no further sound. At last he dropped back on his pillow and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

As soon as he woke, in the early dawn, he remembered. He lay in bed, trying to make up his mind. He knew his duty. He was caretaker as well as "curator." If there were someone else in the house, someone unauthorized, he would be expected to hunt out that person and evict him.

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He could not do it. If his life had depended on it, he could not force himself to search that house.

He had an impulse to hurry to the lawyer, to ask for help. If there had been a telephone, he might perhaps have blurted out his story over it. Fortunately, there was no telephone. By the time he had risen and showered and dressed, he had realized what a foolish move that would have been. He could hear the irritated voice:

"If you can't handle things down there, Cooke, I'll find somebody who can!" And then: "You're letting your imagination run away with you. Why should anybody be there?"

Why indeed? No tramp would go near the Lawrence house; it had an evil reputation. There was nothing to burglarize. Besides, no one could scale the high fence, and the gate was locked. For a second he thought fleetingly of Judge Lawrence's ghosts, though of course that was nonsense. Perhaps he really had imagined the whole thing — misconstrued one of the common sounds of every night in that oddly constructed, gradually sagging freak of a house. Maybe it had been only a dream, a vivid nightmare.

He knew very well, underneath, that it was not. But he also knew that, whatever happened, he was not going to report the intruder to his employer. He had a sudden picture of himself adrift, looking hopelessly for work, an elderly man eating up his small savings. He had been forced to take this post, and he was forced to keep it against all hazards.

That afternoon there was a party of four tourists, then another couple. There was no sign anywhere that anyone but themselves was in the house. But then of course they entered no more than twenty of the 200 rooms.

All night he waited, shaking and jumping at every sound. He did not even undress, but slept a while in his armchair.

Nothing happened.

A week went by, and he was beginning to forget, sleeping no worse than usual, little more frightened than he always had been in that house. Then one night, just as he was thinking of knocking out his pipe and turning in, he heard it again.

It was worse this time. He heard four distinct footsteps. And they were uneven — they were the steps of a limping man.

He had known all along, of course, subconsciously. This made it certain.

James Pryor was living back in the house which had been his home.

It would have been easy enough for him to gain entry — in the afternoon, perhaps, when the gate was open and Cooke was on one of his circuits. Pryor knew every nook and corner of the house; he could hide in any of a thousand places.

Sitting trembling in his armchair, in the now menacing silence, Florian Cooke reasoned with himself. Suppose Pryor *was* living here, why should he be afraid? It was Pryor who should be frightened, lest Cooke reveal his presence and have him ousted. That was common sense.

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Only, common sense had nothing to do with it. The thought of the lame man with the birthmark, roaming secretly about, locked in the same house with him — for how long now? — spying on his comings and goings, filled Cooke with an anguish of terror. His old feeling of guilt rushed in upon him again: it was Pryor, not he, who should be in charge here. And if he felt that way, how must Pryor feel toward him? How did he know that this man, twisted by his afflictions and his years of closeness to a madman, was not planning to get rid of his rival, to eliminate him? If Cooke should disappear, would they not then, Pryor might fancy, be willing to take on the man to whom the post belonged by right?

Florian Cooke shivered.

He sat stiffly, afraid to move a muscle. His racing imagination saw Pryor sneaking softly down one of the thirteen-stepped staircases, limping quietly down the hall, opening his door that had no lock —

He glanced wildly about him for a weapon. Why had he not insisted on being given a gun? He almost smiled in the midst of his panic: he would have been paralyzed with fear at the thought of touching a loaded gun. And there was nothing else he could use to defend himself — even if he could picture himself raising a weapon to bring it down on another human being.

For the second time Florian Cooke sat all night in his chair, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on the door until at last they closed in weariness too strong for fear.

Nothing happened.

The next morning he did not go to the city. He paced up and down in his little winter-killed garden, trying to think his situation out. He recalled Pryor's ravaged face, his wild eyes, his hoarse angry voice. Pryor would never come to him except (he thought with a shudder) in enmity and menace; and he knew with the sad certainty of the coward that his very legs would never carry him to the dim recesses of that dreadful house in search of Pryor.

Another thought occurred to him — how did Pryor eat? He was sure that, once having entered the house, Pryor would not risk leaving and reentering it. Cooke left the garden and went to his kitchen. He opened his cupboard. Yes, he had been right. The morning before he had bought a dozen eggs, and he had fried three for his supper. There were five there now. He searched his other stores; he had not counted things, but he was certain some of the food was gone. Pryor must watch for him to leave the house, and then come down to rifle his kitchen. Well, Pryor must be hungry today; for an instant he was amused.

Then the meaning of Pryor's calm raiding of his stores, of his carelessness in letting his footsteps be heard, came to Cooke. It meant that, however afraid he was of Pryor, Pryor was *not* afraid of him. It meant that Pryor did not even fear Cooke's betraying him to the owners of the house. That he

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despised the little bespectacled man who had been delegated to order him meekly out of the lawyer's office. That he knew Cooke was completely at his mercy.

He must be placated. So long as he was well treated, he might consider his rival not worth the danger and trouble of eliminating. Hastily Cooke laid cheese and fruit and bread and sausage on the kitchen table. He scribbled a note and propped it against the coffee can: "You are welcome. Tell me anything special you want and I'll get it for you. P.S.: Don't worry, I promise not to tell anybody." On second thought he underlined "anybody." Then he put on his coat and hat.

Halfway to the front door he turned back abruptly. What a fool he was! It would only startle and anger Pryor to learn that Cooke knew he was there. He was contemptuous enough, but he would never trust Cooke if Cooke showed, by acknowledging his awareness, that he was not so stupid as Pryor believed.

Quickly he tore up the note in tiny fragments, put the food back in the cooler and the cupboard, where Pryor could look for it and find it as before. Then he walked to the highway and, for the first time in many years, stopped at a roadhouse and spent an hour over two glasses of beer. He was giving Pryor time enough to have his meal and get back to wherever he was hiding.

Terror of that grotesque, embittered man was sweeping over him again as he walked back to the house. The little alcohol he had drunk, since he was so unaccustomed to it, had put his nerves on edge. It seemed to him that he simply could not compel himself to unlock the gate, to enter that accursed house. But he must; it was nearly noon.

That afternoon there was a big unexpected party from one of the high schools — boys and girls who made loud, jeering comments and giggled together and had to be restrained from leaving the group and exploring on their own. Cooke's usual joy in not being alone gave way to dreadful anxiety lest some of his charges might escape, perhaps run across Pryor, and bring the situation to a head. He spoke to them sharply, and some became subdued while others turned surly. They left without saying thank you or goodbye. He waited in the front hall for other visitors, but no one came.

Wearily he went to the kitchen to prepare his supper. On the unlighted stove lay a piece of paper. He stared at it.

"How about broiling a chop or a steak for a change? Your biscuits are good — make some more. And bring me a bottle of whiskey."

His psychology had been all wrong.

Pryor did know his presence had been discovered, and he was treating Florian Cooke like a servant — worse, like a slave. He had only to give his orders and he knew that Cooke, the craven, would obey.

If he stopped obeying, no matter what the orders might be, then Pryor

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would have no hesitancy in destroying him. To Pryor, he was merely an object to be used; if he stopped being useful he would be removed — and who would know or care?

Pryor had ceased, in Cooke's mind, to be an unhappy, perilously situated human being: he had become an embodied horror. Cooke's only hope for survival lay in utter servitude.

He made the biscuits.

The next day he bought chops and a bottle of whiskey. When he went to trim the chops he could not find his sharpest knife anywhere. Now he realized that Pryor was armed.

Somehow Florian Cooke lived through the next week. Almost daily now when he got back from town there was a note in the kitchen. James Pryor had taken Cooke's measure and knew he was safe, no matter how far he went. He gave his orders freely — cigarettes, books, articles of wearing apparel. One day the radio vanished; it was never returned.

Pryor walked openly about the house now, only keeping away from Cooke's quarters when he was there, and from the rooms shown to visitors. Apparently he had been sleeping on the floor of his old rooms, wrapped in whatever blanket or rug he had brought with him, with perhaps a toothbrush and a razor as his other luggage. Now he ordered pillows, sheets, towels, soap. He ordered a lamp. Cooke had to draw from his savings account to keep up with Pryor's demands. He staggered under the bundles he had to carry in the bus; the other passengers stared at him curiously. It was lucky that it was physically impossible for him to carry chairs and tables in his arms.

It was unnecessary. One day his armchair was missing. The next day his bed was gone, the bedclothes heaped on the floor. He slept on the rickety couch in his sitting room after that.

Early in January there was a heavy storm. It was impossible to sleep — the wind whistled down the thirteen false chimneys, roared around the ells and corners of the irregularly shaped house; the rain slammed against the windows and drummed on the turrets and cupolas. In the noise it was difficult to hear anything else. Florian Cooke lay thinking, with the familiar sickness at the pit of his stomach, of the man he served and never saw.

His lamp, as usual, was standing lighted on the table beside him. He sat up to see the time by his watch, and his arm brushed the lamp. It tottered, and he caught it just before it fell. His heart hammered and his skin turned cold at the thought of how near he had come to starting a fire that could spread before he could extinguish it. The old wooden house would burn like straw.

And upstairs, he thought suddenly, was another man with another lamp — a violent, careless man with none of Florian Cooke's caution.

He would never dare sleep there again. But without sleep he would die.

He planned craftily. Henceforth he would stay awake all night and every

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night, ready to dash out of the house at the first whiff of smoke. Early every morning he would go to the city, he would rent a room and sleep there till it was time to do his errands and go back to the house.

So planning, he fell asleep.

In the morning he remembered his plan, and it still seemed good to him.

At the bus station in the city he got a time-table. The first morning bus he could get left his stop at 5:17. He could get to the city, go to his rented room, and count on about four hours' sleep before he must attend to his business and return.

It was hopeless. The four hours, with his difficulty in falling asleep, would be three or less. No human being could survive long on that. Sooner or later he would oversleep, miss the hour when the house must be opened for visitors, and lose his job.

Instead of looking for a room, he went to the lawyer's office, though it was not the time for his monthly visit. He could stand no more. He would probably be dismissed for not having reported the facts when he first discovered them. He would never get another job. He would be a derelict, living in flophouses on relief. But he had reached the limit of fear that a man can endure and live.

He reached his hand to the doorknob. He did not turn it.

If he became the instrument by which Pryor was hunted down and thrown out of the Lawrence house, he might as well sign his own death warrant. If it were the last thing he ever did, even if he brought about his own destruction, Pryor would find his betrayer and kill him in revenge. Cooke was so absolutely sure of it that doubt would have seemed to him fantastic and idiotic.

With a sort of dull wonder he realized how tenacious was his own desire for life. Another man in his situation might have sought the easy way out, just as another man might have faced Pryor. But he was Florian Cooke, with his own nature and his own history; and the one thing Florian Cooke feared worse than James Pryor was death. There could be no escape that way.

As he stood in the hall outside the lawyer's office, he realized that no despair could stiffen him to revolt. As long as Pryor lived, Florian Cooke would be a slave, by virtue of his own unconquerable fear.

He turned and left the building. He walked to the bus station and boarded the bus, a man yielding to doom. At the Lawrence house, like an automaton he turned the useless key in the useless lock, entered, and prepared for the day's visitors and the evening's placation of his master.

Late that night, so that they would be good and fresh the way Pryor wanted them, he baked a batch of biscuits. He measured the ingredients carefully, with respect for his own skill; he was an excellent cook. The flour, the baking powder, the salt, the shortening.

And two heaping tablespoonsful of roach-powder.

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A WINNER IN EQMM's PRIZE CONTEST

A hard, bitter, hard-bitten story by the author of "The Tea Pusher" (in our issue of May 1952), one of the outstanding prize-winners in EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest . . . Mr. Schoenfeld has a keen perception and a strong understanding of the seamy and decadent side of our culture, and he writes about the "forgotten men," the "great unwashed," without pulling any punches.

ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN GOT SHOES

by HOWARD SCHOENFELD

WE HEADED SOUTH ON OUR WAY to Florida, but only got as far as Georgia before it got too cold. In Georgia we were picked up and put in jail as vagrants. We worked on the road gang for two months until it began getting warm again, and they let us go. They gave us 50 cents a day for every day we worked on the road gang, and we had $30 apiece when they turned us loose, and had had warm beds all winter, and been fairly comfortable, but it had been a long time to go without a drink.

We took our money and went to the first bar we could find in Macon, and left it there. By then it was warm enough to go back on the road, so we managed a wine jug, went down to the Macon railroad yards, and grabbed a freight going toward Birmingham. It was one of those local freights that stop everywhere, and are always backing up, and maneuvering around. This one had a yard engine on it, and was twice as slow as it should have been, even for a local. We opened an empty boxcar, and crawled in, leaving the door open so sunlight could get in. There were some empty toesacks on the floor, and we sat on them while the train started moving. Then we hit the wine jug.

Carl, sitting with his back against the wall, pulled his foot up to his knee, and tried to do something to the sole of his shoe. The sole was coming off.

"These shoes are all shot to pieces. I've got to get a new pair somewhere," he said.

"You should have bought a pair when we had the money to pay for them," I said.

"Yeah," Carl said. "I guess so."

"You could get a pair for nothing if you weren't so stubborn."

"Where?" Carl asked.

"At the Salvation Army in Birmingham."

"Not me. You'll never catch me

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in one of those places. I'm no bum," Carl said.

"You can't go around barefooted."

"Don't worry. I'll get shoes all right."

"How? You going to start stealing again?" I asked.

"What if I do? It's nothing to you."

"You'd rather be a thief than bum a pair of shoes."

"I'm no bum. You're not either," Carl said.

"Yes, I am. We're both bums."

"You make me sick talking like that. We aren't bums and you know it," Carl said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Then shut up, will you?"

"O.K. Don't get excited."

"O.K."

We sat there a few minutes, the train now going at full speed, and sunlight streaming in on the floor of the boxcar.

"Sometimes you forget," I said.

"What're you talking about?" Carl asked.

"Laws. They don't apply to us any more. We know they don't, but sometimes we start acting as if they do," I said.

"Yeah. You're right about that. Laws don't apply to us. We're just a couple of thieves," Carl said, grinning.

"No. We're a couple of 'gentlemen of the open road'," I said.

"Alcoholic gentlemen," Carl corrected, passing me the jug.

"Very, very alcoholic," I said, taking it. We both laughed.

The train slowed down, and stopped, cars bumping together. Up front they were taking on coal and water. Where we were we could see two or three farmhouses, trees in their front yards, and cows in the back. As soon as the train got watered and coaled, and started off slowly again, a boy came out of one of the houses carrying a grip. He ran to the boxcar we were in, and threw his grip inside. Then he crawled in. His grip had a college sticker on it, so we knew he was a college boy.

"Howdy, fellows," the college boy said.

"Morning, bud," Carl said.

The college boy sat down, and dangled his feet out of the door of the boxcar as the train got going. He was a tall, stout fellow with red hair. His face muscles were thick.

"Better not sit like that. You're liable to lose a foot," Carl said.

The college boy got up and found a toesack. He sat on it the way we were, with his back against the wall, feet stretched out straight on the floor in front of him.

"It's dangerous riding with your feet out. You might hit a cow guard. They'll knock your legs off, shoes and everything, just like that," Carl said. He snapped his fingers to show how.

"Thanks for telling me," the college boy said.

"That's all right. What size shoe do you wear?" Carl asked, politely.

"Why, uh, nine and a half, I guess. Why?"

"That's too big. Nothing."

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"Shut up, Carl," I said.

"Where you bound for?" Carl asked.

"Tupelo, Mississippi. I go to college there."

"You don't want to ride this train. You want to get off at the next town and wait for a hot shot. You'll never get anywhere on this train," Carl said.

"Why?"

"This is a local. It stops everywhere. Takes its time."

"Oh."

"What do you study at Tupelo?" I asked.

"Economics, sociology, philosophy — stuff like that."

"I went to college once," Carl said.

"Did you play football?" the college boy asked.

"No. I got the Phi Beta Kappa key."

"Aw, I don't believe that! You wouldn't be doing this if you had the key."

Carl took the key out of his watch pocket.

"Here it is. I've never pawned it," he said, proudly.

"That's the key all right, but it's pretty hard to believe. Why don't you go to work?"

Carl laughed. "I'm too delicate for work."

I caught the college boy's eye and nodded at the jug. The college boy stared at it, then at Carl, and then at me. He was goggle-eyed.

"Cripes," he said. "When I get back to Tupelo I'll write an article for the local papers about you guys."

"Thank you," Carl said. "You don't know how much that means to me."

"Why don't you spend an entire day with us? You could write a whole novel about us then," I said.

"No, I have to go back to school."

"I'd like to read a novel about us," Carl said.

"You could call it 'Gentlemen of the Open Road'," I urged.

"Or 'Alcoholic Gentlemen of the Open Road'," Carl suggested.

"Or 'Very, Very Alcoholic Gentlemen of the Open Road'," I pressed.

"No," the college boy decided. "But I saw a movie about people like you a couple of years ago. Ray Milland played the lead. Parts of it were almost poetic."

"I feel poetic sometimes," Carl said.

"So do I. Would you like to hear me recite *The Shooting of Dan McGrew?*" I asked.

"The hero of the movie became a bowery bum because he couldn't stop drinking. He even pawned his typewriter," the college boy said.

"That's very tragic. I wouldn't want to lose a typewriter that way, would you, chum?" Carl asked.

"No. I can't imagine anything more tragic than pawning a typewriter," I said.

"How did you fellows become tramps?" the college boy asked.

"We're not tramps. We're thieves," Carl said.

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's half nuts," I said.

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After that we didn't talk much until we got to Gurdon. The train stopped at Gurdon, where there was a depot, ten or twelve frame houses, a gas station, and a general store. When the train stopped Carl turned to the college boy.

"Here's where you get off," he said.

"I think I'll stay on this train a while," the college boy said.

"You thought we were bums. We don't like you, kid. You'll have to get off here," Carl said.

"Why?"

"I said here's where you get off. You going to make trouble?"

"Not if that's the way you feel about it."

"That's the way we feel about it. Get out."

"All right," the college boy said.

He picked up his grip and got out of the boxcar, and walked away toward the gas station at Gurdon. There were hitch hikers standing at the station.

Carl got up and looked out.

"That was a nice pair of shoes he had on," he said.

"Yeah. Cordovan," I said.

"They were too big for me," Carl said.

A woman came over to our car from the gas station, and started to get in. She was wearing overalls, and was young, and had a hard face. I could see her from where I was sitting.

"You can't get on here," Carl said.

"Why not?" the woman in overalls asked.

"We don't want you. Get off."

"I will not. I've got as much right here as you have," she said.

She was trying to get in the boxcar, hunching on her elbows on the edge of the door at Carl's feet. She was halfway on, and halfway off, her legs dangling.

"All right, you asked for it," Carl said.

He put his foot on her shoulder and pushed. The woman in the overalls fell back on the ground with a thud, in a sitting position.

She sat there cursing, as the train started moving slowly, Carl standing at the door.

"What did you do that for?" I asked.

"I got to get a pair of shoes. How many people you think I want around?"

The train was going a little faster. We had left the woman in overalls behind. A hitch hiker came out of the gas station and ran over to the boxcar we were in, carrying a grip. The hitch hiker trotted alongside the open door, and tossed his grip in.

Carl got a hold on an upright and leaned out.

"Here you are, pal. Take my hand," he said. He pulled the hitch hiker in.

"Thanks."

"That's all right." Carl sat down again.

The hitch hiker picked up his grip, and sat down, too, with the grip near him. He was a dark-haired man, of medium height, with eyes of an odd amber color. His clothes were good.

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He wore a brown gabardine suit and had on brown shoes. He looked out of place in a boxcar.

The train was going fast now. The hitch hiker was lucky to have been able to get on after he threw his grip inside.

"Those are nice shoes you're wearing," Carl said.

"Yeah," the hitch hiker said. "They ought to be. They cost enough."

"They look like a rich man's shoes. You must be rich," I said.

"What size are they?" Carl asked.

"Size eight. I'm not rich."

"You dress like you're rich," I said.

"I'm a reporter. I work for a living."

"I've always wanted to meet a reporter," Carl said. "Who do you report for?"

"A newspaper in New York. You probably never heard of it."

"Probably not."

"That's why I'm on the bum. I'm writing a series of articles on what's happening to the underprivileged during the current boom. We still have our underprivileged with us, you know. Even now."

"So I've heard," Carl said. He was eyeing the hitch hiker's expensive shoes.

"You don't look like you've been bumming," I said.

"No. I've only been on the road two days. I sleep in hotels at night."

"How long will it take you to get the information you want?"

"Three more days."

"That will make five days you've spent on the road. Will you know enough to write the articles then?" I asked.

"Yes. I knew enough before I started."

"How?"

"Reading things. Statistics, among other things."

"I see."

"You ought to do some reading yourself. You wouldn't stand for this situation."

"What situation?"

"This situation where some people have everything and others have nothing."

"I don't know why you're complaining. You're wearing a fine pair of shoes," Carl said.

"That isn't the point. It isn't right that I have a pair of good shoes and you don't."

"I should like to have your shoes," Carl said.

"Then you agree with me."

"No. I only want your shoes. Will you give them to me?"

"No. Why should I?"

"You won't give me your shoes?"

"No."

"You believe in some kind of a cause?"

"In a way. Yes."

"Would you die for it?"

"I'd like to think I would."

"Would you be a martyr?"

"If I had to be," the hitch hiker said, nervously. "Yes."

"You shall," Carl said.

"What do you mean?" the hitch hiker asked, alarmed.

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Carl pulled his knife out of his pocket and stood up. He pressed the handle of the knife and the blade shot out, long, slim, and dangerous-looking.

The hitch hiker licked his lips.

"You shall die a martyr to my cause. My cause is a pair of shoes," Carl explained.

The hitch hiker went into a funk, his amber eyes darting in their sockets quickly. He took his shoes off in a hurry.

"You can have the shoes. I don't want them. Here take them."

He held out the shoes. They had come off in record-breaking time. He was in a funk, his hands shaking, and his eyes rolling. He looked at me. I was having a fine time. So was Carl.

Carl walked toward the hitch hiker, the knife in his hand. The reporter dropped the shoes. Carl reached down and grabbed him by the arm.

"It's too late now. You should have given them to me when I asked for them. You might go to the cops. It's too bad, but I'll have to kill you."

The hitch hiker, looking at the knife in Carl's hand, and then at me, started screaming.

"I won't go to the cops. I don't want to die," he screamed. "Oh, God."

"Pray," Carl said. He lifted his knife hand and touched the man's neck with the point of the blade.

"Oh, God —"

Suddenly he broke into a screech, jerked loose from Carl, ran in his stockinged feet to the door of the boxcar, and jumped out of the moving train.

Carl ran over to the door of the boxcar and stared out. I ran over too. The train was going through level country, and we could see back pretty well. I leaned out as far as possible, holding onto the door. Backward nothing could be seen for a couple of minutes except farmhouses, and fields under cultivation. Then we saw the hitch hiker get up slowly and brush himself off. He stood there a while, brushing and getting his bearings. He limped away from the tracks, walking gingerly over the ground in his stocking feet, toward a nearby farmhouse.

"Whew," Carl said. "That was a dumb trick. It's a wonder he wasn't killed."

"It's a good thing he took a running jump. He might have fallen under the wheels."

"What did he want to jump off for? I wasn't going to hurt him. I wouldn't kill anybody," Carl said.

"He didn't figure it that way."

"Well, to hell with him. Look at these shoes." Carl was looking at the soles. "They aren't bad."

He handed me the shoes. They were a pretty good pair.

"See if you can get me a pair like these," I said. "You've got good taste for a thief."

Carl grinned. He liked being called a thief. He was afraid somebody might think he was a bum.

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WINNER OF A SPECIAL AWARD

C. B. Gilford is in his early thirties, married, and has one child. During World War II he spent three years as a B-29 combat navigator, and as a sideline (that's the way Mr. Gilford expressed it) he wrote military citations. A great deal of his prose is therefore buried somewhere in the Pentagon files.

For a living, the author taught theatre arts and directed plays for four years at Rockhurst College in Kansas City, and he is now doing the same at Saint Louis University. He has an M.A. from Catholic University in Washington, D. C. and a Ph.D. from the University of Denver. He still considers writing an avocation, and he confesses to a second avocation — acting. When Normandy Productions, Inc., a TV-film company, came to Denver in the summer of 1952 and shot an hour-length version of "The Merchant of Venice," it was Mr. Gilford who donned costume and make-up to play the role of Shylock. But as against his established vocations — teaching and directing — Mr. Gilford wonders if he will ever have the courage either to become a full-time writer or a full-time actor; both roads, he says ruefully, are long and hard.

Given the talent (and Mr. Gilford has that), the teacher-director-actor-writer has every reason to be hopeful. For along with talent, Mr. Gilford has another quality — bulldog tenacity. "Heaven Can Wait" won a special award in last year's EQMM contest — but only after the author had the determination and perseverance to submit the story in two previous EQMM contests, listen to our criticisms, rewrite (the Lord knows how many times), and finally submit again — with patience and fortitude.

We salute you, Mr. Gilford!

HEAVEN CAN WAIT

by C. B. GILFORD

"AGE AT TIME OF DEATH?" ASKED Michael, who was an archangel. "Fifty-two. Correct?"

"Correct," said Alexander Arlington wearily. It seemed to him that he'd been answering questions ever since he arrived.

"Immediate Cause of Death?" continued the archangel.

"Heart attack. That is, I think so,"

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Alexander replied, frowning slightly.

"Hmmm." The archangel seemed embarrassed. "Now, this last blank. Contributing Circumstances, If Any. Check one, it says. Self-immolation, Foolhardiness, Stupidity, Murder, et cetera. There's a check-mark after 'Murder.'"

Alexander sat up. "Murder?"

"Yes," said Michael. "That's the information I have from my work-sheet. Correct me if I'm wrong. You *were* murdered, weren't you, Mr. Arlington?"

"Well, I didn't think so. I . . ."

"Do you mean," asked Michael kindly, "that you didn't know you were murdered?"

"Why, I never dreamed it!"

Michael sighed. "That sometimes happens, of course. Most people know when they're being murdered, however. Not till the last minute, naturally, but they usually know. I never have learned how to break news like this gently."

"I can't believe it," Alexander repeated to himself several times.

"I regret that you're taking this so hard, Mr. Arlington. You must realize that such things make no difference whatsoever here."

"I was in my study. I think I must have been asleep. I seemed to awaken with a sort of bursting pain . . . in my chest . . . I didn't have time really to think about it."

"There's a note added here," Michael said, consulting his record. "It was your heart, all right, Mr. Arlington. You were stabbed with your own letter-opener . . . in the back."

"Why, that's positively fiendish," exclaimed Alexander. "My letter-opener was really an ivory-handled dagger . . . Who did it?"

"I beg your pardon? Who did what?"

"Who murdered me?"

"Why, I don't know that."

"You don't know! I thought you had all the information on that infernal work-sheet of yours."

"It's not an *infernal* work-sheet!"

"All right, whatever it is. Who murdered me?"

"Mr. Arlington!" The archangel looked stern. "Ideas of revenge and recrimination are, as you should already know, forbidden here."

"Okay, okay. I just want to know."

"I don't know who murdered you, Mr. Arlington. I'm an archangel, but I don't know everything. We don't find out such things until the perpetrator of the deed has met his own demise. I'll have a work-sheet on him then, and I'll let you know."

"How long will that take?"

"If the murderer is apprehended and hanged, let us say, it may be relatively soon. If the murderer has been smart and is not found out, it may be years."

"I can't wait! I want to know *now*."

"Mr. Arlington, I'm sorry —"

"Is there anyone here who *would* know?"

"Well, of course, He would. He knows everything."

"Then ask Him."

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"That's impossible. I can't bother Him with such trifles . . . Mr. Arlington, sit down!"

But instead of sitting down, Alexander continued his pacing. "You told me I should be happy and contented in this place," he complained.

"Absolutely," said Michael with great assurance.

"How can I be happy and contented if I don't know who murdered me?"

"I don't see how that makes any difference, Mr. Arlington!"

Alexander, making a distinct effort to compose himself, sat down again in the golden chair. "Sir," he began more calmly, "what does it say about my profession on your work-sheet?"

"You were a writer of mystery stories."

"Correct. Under the pen-name of Slade Saunders, I was the author of 75 mystery novels — more than a dozen of them purchased by the movies — assorted short stories, and articles too numerous to mention. Does that have any significance for you, sir?"

"Not exactly."

"Don't you understand?" Alexander almost lost his temper again. "Here I am, the famous mystery author, who for twenty years asked and answered the question, 'Who did it?' and now — now! — I myself have been murdered and I don't know who did it!"

The archangel smiled. "I see your point, Mr. Arlington," he said. "But the information you're after will come through in good time. Now, if you'll just be patient and compose yourself —"

"I must know the identity of my murderer," Alexander insisted. "I'll never be happy until I do. Stabbed in the back! Really!"

"Come now, Mr. Arlington," soothed the archangel. "Wait till you see our Establishment here. The facilities for enjoyment are quite —"

"I don't want to see it." Alexander slumped in his chair, staring at the floor. "I don't want to see *any* of it."

"Mr. Arlington!"

"It's a fake. It's all a fake. Happy and contented! I'm not happy. I'm miserable."

"You *can't* be miserable up here," Michael said, something like panic rising in his voice. "It's utterly impossible for you to be anything but happy. You're in Heaven."

"I'm miserable."

The archangel rose; his large, bare feet padded noiselessly on the beautiful marble floor. "This is ridiculous," he mumbled several times. "Preposterous! Mr. Arlington, won't you reconsider?"

"I'm miserable."

"Be reasonable, Mr. Arlington," the archangel pleaded. "You simply can't imagine the embarrassment, the loss of prestige it would entail, if you went about Heaven proclaiming that you weren't happy."

"I'm miserable," Alexander insisted, and he looked it.

"I'd ask Him," said Michael; and he was beginning to look miserable,

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too. "Really I would. But He has so many things on His mind these days. . . . On the other hand, if He knew there was somebody up here who wasn't happy, I'm sure He'd blame me. I'm a department head, Mr. Arlington, which puts the responsibility squarely on my shoulders."

"I'm miserable."

The archangel winced and resumed his pacing. Now and then through the open windows came the gentle sounds of laughter and music. But within the room, Alexander Arlington sat brooding.

Suddenly Michael's expression lightened. He strode back to his desk and sat down again.

"Mr. Arlington, you are a writer of mystery stories," he said briskly. "You are reputed to be clever at devising clues, trapping murderers, and all that sort of thing?"

"Yes."

"What I have in mind," continued Michael, "is completely irregular, of course. But the situation demands swift action. Do you think, Mr. Arlington, that you could solve this mystery to your satisfaction if you were allowed to go back to Earth?"

"Well, I suppose . . ."

"It's as far as I can go," Michael said austerely.

"I could certainly try. But how —?"

"Simple," interrupted Michael. "You are now existing in Eternity, quite independent of the element of Time. So we repeat a certain period of Time, as it were . . . let us say, one day. You would return to Earth and relive the last day of your mortal life. Let's see . . . Here! You died precisely at midnight. You would have from the moment you awakened on that last morning until midnight of the same day."

"One day?" frowned Alexander. "That wouldn't give me much time."

"If you'd rather not try . . ."

"I'll do it," Alexander said hastily. "When do I start?"

"Immediately. But first, Mr. Arlington, a reminder. That last day of your life is down on the records, so it is not technically subject to change. However, you *will* have to do a little investigating, some few things you didn't do the first time you lived that final day . . . I can make some minor erasures on the Books, but I should be extremely embarrassed if there had to be any major ones."

"But —"

"You will simply have to manage without important changes. It should present no difficulties. You will have, remember, a gift seldom granted to mortals."

"The gift of foresight," exclaimed Alexander.

"Yes. However, Mr. Arlington, I must remind you that you'll have to submit to being murdered all over again."

The gleam in Alexander's eye went out. "I suppose I shall have to be stabbed in the back again . . ."

The archangel nodded. "That's the way it is in the records," he said, and

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his voice was like the tolling of a bell. "Do you care to reconsider?"

"No . . . I'll go through with it. I've got to know who killed me."

"Very well, Mr. Arlington. I wish you luck. We do want all our souls to be happy."

"Thank you," said Alexander unhappily, and he walked out through the golden door . . .

. . . And awoke in his own bed, in his own room, in the dark and drafty old mansion in which he had always thought it so fitting and proper for a mystery writer to reside. The ancient grandfather's clock in the hallway was striking 12. He counted the strokes, and for a horrible moment — before he could collect his wits — he imagined that it might be midnight already. But no, there was the sunshine just beyond his drawn blinds. Noon, the rising time of a successful author. But it gave him so little time . . .

There was an insistent knocking at his door.

"Come in," Alexander said.

The door opened and his secretary, Talbert, appeared. "The mail has arrived," Talbert announced.

"Well?"

"There's a letter from Fenton." Talbert was a thin, scholarly man of 35. He seldom smiled, but at the moment the ghost of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "I opened it, thinking it was routine. But you'd better read it yourself."

Alexander took the letter. "Dear Alex," it began, "I must be candid. It was with some hesitation that we decided to publish that last novel of yours, *Murder of a Mannequin*. Perhaps it will do all right, but if it does, it will only be because of your name and reputation. Frankly, it's the opinion here that you have been slipping. Each book has been a little weaker than the one before. Is the well running dry? Perhaps you should take a long rest. As we've still got a contract with you for your next five books, this is of great concern to us. So I'm coming out to talk things over with you. I'll arrive on the 9 o'clock train Thursday morning. Yours, Walter Fenton."

Talbert was still standing there.

"I have a suggestion," he said.

"Oh, you have!" said Alexander savagely.

"Fenton suggests that you need a rest. I agree with him. But while you're resting, the public need not be deprived of the enjoyment of reading mystery novels by the famous Slade Saunders."

"Just what do you mean?" Alexander leaped out of bed.

"I," said Talbert calmly, "will continue to write the books under the pen-name of Slade Saunders. Fenton need never know. Or our public, either."

"*Our* public! Do you imagine for one moment that *you* could imitate my style?"

"I could do more than imitate your style, Alexander. I could improve on it."

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"You insolent — you presumptuous —"

"Do I have to remind you, Alexander, how large a part of your last few books was mine, anyway? I worked on the plots, made corrections, did rewriting —"

"Get out of here!"

"It's your only chance to rescue the reputation of Slade Saunders. I'll split 50–50 with you."

"You're fired!"

"Alexander —"

"Fired!"

"You'll never be able to replace me. And what's more, you'll never be able to finish another book without me."

"Pack your things and leave, Talbert, or I'll have you thrown out!"

"You'll regret this." And so saying, Talbert stalked out of the room.

Yes, that was the way Alexander's last day had started. The letter from Fenton and the quarrel with Talbert. What an odd feeling to be repeating one's actions precisely! Just as if the incident had occurred before, in a dream . . .

The thought shocked Alexander. A dream? What if his entire experience with the archangel had been a dream?

The ringing of the telephone interrupted this interesting line of thought. The bedroom extension was at his elbow. Alexander reached for it.

"Hello?"

"This is Michael."

"*What?* Well . . . uh . . . Where are you calling from?"

"That's a silly question, don't you think, Mr. Arlington?"

"What . . . do you want?"

"Just checking to find out if you made the trip safely. How are things coming?"

"Give me a chance, will you, sir? I haven't even got started!"

"Well, you'd better get to work, Mr. Arlington. You haven't much time, you know. Goodbye for now."

"Goodbye."

That settled that. It was no dream, so it was indeed time to get down to business. But to have to work with Someone looking over one's shoulder, as it were . . .

For the next half hour Alexander occupied himself with shaving and dressing. He thought about Talbert — timid, shrinking Talbert, who chose today of all days to show his fangs. Yes, Talbert coveted the name and reputation of Slade Saunders, Alexander's most prized possession. Talbert had a motive for murder, all right.

What had happened next?

Alexander discovered that he didn't remember. He was to be murdered at midnight, in his study, stabbed with his own ivory-handled letter-opener. But he remembered nothing else. He should have picked up more information from that archangel.

On the other hand, it might be better this way. Foreseeing *every* detail might be a little too eerie. And this way, too, he'd have a freer hand.

Walking downstairs, Alexander realized that he was hungry. In the

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dining room, Annie the cook was ready with his usual afternoon breakfast. Alexander studied Annie's broad, empty face as she served him. Besides Annie there was her daughter Agnes, his wife's maid. But neither Annie nor Agnes had any earthly reason to murder him. Anyway, they both went home every night. Alexander decided that he could dismiss both of them from his calculations.

"Better hurry with your breakfast, Mr. Arlington," Annie said to him when she brought in his poached egg. "I've got to have lunch ready on time, because there's going to be a guest."

"Who?"

"Mr. Armbruster."

Now he remembered! This, too, had happened the first time. Armbruster, the big young man with the dark curly hair.

"Good morning, darling."

A quick cool kiss on his left cheek turned him around. The thought shot through his mind — a kiss of betrayal. But he said, quite pleasantly, "Good morning, Ariel."

Alexander abandoned the poached egg for a moment to survey his wife. Twenty-eight, scarcely more than half his age. She was beautiful because he had been able to afford a young, beautiful wife. Blonde, slim, graceful, a creature of light and air. His Ariel.

"So Armbruster's coming for lunch?"

"Do you mind, darling?"

"Yes, I do mind. I mind having that penniless young athlete hanging around my house, devouring my wife with his eyes."

"What an imagination you have, darling!"

"Has he ever made love to you?"

"Of course not."

"That's a lie, my dear. I saw it all yesterday."

Alexander Arlington was amazing himself. Now that the words were out of his mouth, he suddenly remembered what he must have, in the excitement of being murdered, temporarily forgotten. This had all happened once before.

"I saw you, my dearest, out in the arbor. And I might add that I wasn't particularly stunned. Neither of you has been very discreet."

Ariel had paled, and sat down weakly.

"Surprised, my dearest one? Well, now, let me tell you something. It's perfectly all right with me, young Mr. Armbruster's coming here to lunch today. In fact, I think that after lunch you and he should have a long talk. You might tell him that I know everything. And then you can both decide what to do. You personally have two choices. The first is to leave me and go away with Armbruster. Of course, he doesn't have a cent and you can't expect me to subsidize a little love-nest for you. If you get tired of starving with Armbruster, however, you cannot return here. Your second choice is to stay. In that case, I would demand loyalty and fidelity from you, and Mr. Armbruster would have to look

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for his handouts elsewhere," he added.

That, Alexander reflected, should settle Mr. Armbruster's hash. Ariel was not the sort who could live on love alone. She had been accustomed to the finer things for too long.

But then — and it hadn't, of course, been the first time he had delivered this ultimatum — another thought dawned.

Here was another motive for murder. Ariel was down in his will for half the tidy fortune he had accumulated in a lifetime of writing. If Armbruster knew that, he might prefer Ariel as a moneyed widow rather than as a dispossessed wife. Or if Ariel herself wanted the young man badly enough . . .

"Will you be lunching with us?" Ariel was asking.

"I think not," Alexander answered grandly. "I'd only be in the way. Besides, I've just had breakfast. Also, I've more important things to do."

She went away then, and Alexander watched her trim figure as she departed. Then he returned to his egg, finished it quickly, and left the dining room to Annie's preparations for the luncheon guest.

He went to his study, the scene of the crime.

Alexander felt awe as he entered his own death-chamber. The blinds were drawn, making the room a shadowy place. Uneasily Alexander let the sunlight in. Then he looked around.

There was his desk, of massive mahogany. He surely must have been sitting in his chair, at this desk. And he must have dozed off, as he often did, with his arms spread on the desk and his head on his arms. An inviting target. And there was the letter-opener. He picked it up gingerly, half-expecting to find dried blood on its blade.

But of course there wouldn't be . . . yet.

The thing made a nasty murder-weapon, Alexander reflected. Its handle was four inches long, of smooth and heavy old ivory. Would take fingerprints nicely, if the murderer were careless. The blade was even longer — neither razor-sharp nor needle-pointed. But quite adequate, if thrust with reasonable strength and accuracy, to impale a man's heart.

A knock interrupted his cogitations. The knocker entered without waiting to be invited. "Busy, Uncle Alex?"

"No, no. Come in, Andrew."

Andrew threw up one fat leg and hoisted himself to a perch on the desk. His weight caused the sturdy mahogany to creak. Andrew's small piggish eyes stared from behind thick-lensed glasses.

"How's finances with you, Uncle?"

"How much this time?" asked Alexander Arlington.

"Five hundred."

Alexander leaned back in his swivel chair and considered the huge lump on his desk. "I told you last time, Andrew, there'd be no more squaring of your debts. At least not until you show some signs of helping yourself — which means getting a job. So my answer, Andrew, is no."

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"My situation is pretty desperate, Uncle Alex."

"That's your affair."

"What am I going to do?"

"That's also your affair."

"I'll have to do something . . . drastic."

The remark startled Alexander. This conversation, as well as his argument with Talbert and his talk with Ariel, had also happened before. Andrew was heir to the other half of his estate — not because Alexander had ever liked Andrew, but simply because Andrew was his one and only blood-relative. And now the worthless nephew needed money.

Still another motive for murder.

"Just what would something — er — drastic be, Andrew?"

"I don't know. But if you won't help me, whatever happens will be your fault."

The great mass slid off the desk, walked to the door, and went out. Despite his size, there was a certain grace and quickness in nephew Andrew's movements. Strangely, Alexander had never noticed this before. But then he was discovering so many things of which he had once been oblivious.

The sunshine, filtering through the curtained windows, looked suddenly inviting. At the moment, Alexander wasn't feeling particularly fond of this room.

He decided that he needed fresh air — and a chance to think.

In the garden, instead of solitude, he found Harry. Old Harry was gardener, caretaker, handyman, chauffeur and, in the evenings when Annie and her daughter had gone home, he was the butler. Harry was also an admitted ex-convict. Here he had been especially useful to Alexander. Under the influence of alcohol supplied by his employer, Harry often reminisced of his past exploits in the world of crime for the benefit of Alexander's notebook. Some of these exploits, Alexander had gathered, had never been discovered or penalized. Doubtless there were at least a dozen cities in which Harry was wanted.

At the moment Alexander was in no mood for plot material. But Harry had something on his mind.

"I've been hearing things, Mr. Arlington."

"What things?"

"About your books."

"My books? What about my books?"

"Maybe there won't be any more."

Talbert had talked! The gist, if not the complete text, of Fenton's letter was probably known throughout the household by this time. Then Ariel and Armbruster knew, too. And Andrew.

"How does that concern you, Harry, even supposing it were true? Afraid of losing your job?"

The old man squinted up at him. Harry was remarkably ugly. "Not worried about my job," he answered. "But I've been thinking, Mr. Arlington, about all the things I've told you about myself. That was okay while you were writing your books. But

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now that there maybe won't be any more books, you might start talking to the cops."

"Why should I do a thing like that, Harry? What does it matter to me what your past is? You've reformed, and you're earning an honest living now."

"The cops don't care about that."

"Well, I'm not going to say anything to the cops . . . Harry, don't you believe me?

It was obvious that he didn't. The old fellow turned away and started digging with the hoe again. The strokes were strong, swift, accurate. And his face was dark and grim.

This, too, Alexander remembered with the same strange feeling that it had all happened before. In his garden he had unearthed another potential murderer . . .

Back at the desk in his study, Alexander sat down heavily. Why, when he had first lived through this fateful last day of his life, hadn't any of these things occurred to him? Why hadn't he realized that he was literally surrounded by people who would profit by his death? Everyone in this house, except old Annie and her daughter Agnes, had a motive to kill him. And at least one of them must also have the nerve.

The telephone rang, and without thinking Alexander picked up the study extension.

"This is Michael."

"Oh . . . Good afternoon."

"Something wrong, Mr. Arlington? You don't sound very chipper."

"This has all been very disheartening, sir."

"Yes?"

"Except for two domestics who don't live in, everyone under my roof would like to see me dead."

"That's nothing to be downcast about, Mr. Arlington."

"No?"

"If you realize how much you're not wanted on earth, you won't have the slightest regret about coming back up here."

"Hm. That's so, isn't it?"

"Anything else troubling you, Mr. Arlington?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, there is. I haven't found any clues."

"Look for some."

"That's just it. You see, in my books — and in real life, too — there are never any clues until *after* the murder. A murderer usually leaves clues at the time he commits the murder. What am I going to do about that?"

"My dear Mr. Arlington, I'm sure I don't know. You should have considered that difficulty before you left."

"I wish I had!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to sit tight and wait until midnight. See you then."

Alexander mixed himself a drink. It was 4 o'clock. One-third of his allotted time had already elapsed. He took his drink glumly to the window. Clouds had appeared in the sky, promising rain.

A good night for a murder.

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It was thus by the merest accident, as he stood sipping his cocktail, that he saw his wife and Armbruster. The athletic young man was kissing her.

At that instant there was born in Alexander Arlington's heart a new determination.

He didn't smash his glass on the floor or crush it in his fist, as a more emotional man might have done. Instead, he stood there and slowly finished his drink while Armbruster slowly finished kissing his wife. For now, at last, Alexander had concocted a plan.

After he had drained his glass, he went to the kitchen. "Annie," he announced, "Mr. Armbruster will be staying to dinner, and so will Talbert and my nephew. And you may tell Harry to serve."

Up in Talbert's room he found his secretary packing. "You can put away that suitcase, Talbert."

"You told me I was fired," the secretary answered sulkily.

"You still are. But I'd like you to stay around till tomorrow. You may find it to your advantage, my boy."

Andrew was enjoying his afternoon nap when Alexander shook him awake. "If you have any plans for going out tonight, cancel them. I want to have a long talk with you. You may find it profitable."

Then Alexander went out to the garden.

"Sorry I couldn't have lunch with you, Armbruster," he told the man he had seen kissing his wife, "but I'd like you to stay for dinner with us."

Armbruster's handsome face registered surprise, but he mumbled that he would be delighted. Ariel was stricken dumb. Alexander smiled upon them with secret excitement. If his plan worked . . . !

Dinner was at 7:30. It was already dark and it had started to rain when Annie and her daughter left the house. Harry served in grim silence.

Alexander was the only one who ate heartily. The others went through the motions, but they were preoccupied. Ariel looked at Armbruster frequently, and Armbruster looked back at her. Talbert's thin face was a mask through which only a glint of his sullenness showed. Andrew usually possessed an excellent appetite, but it was not evident tonight. All of them watched Alexander stealthily.

It was 9 o'clock before the meal ended. Alexander rose, smiling down at them. "I'll see you all in my study in an hour. Having a little celebration — a sort of farewell party."

This cryptic remark left them staring blankly. Alexander went complacently upstairs to his bedroom and began to pack a suitcase. He had hardly stowed two pairs of socks in the bag when the telephone rang.

"This is Michael."

"I was rather expecting your call."

"Your mood has changed considerably in the last several hours."

"Yes, it has . . . yes."

"Where do you think you're going with that suitcase?"

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"I'm shortly to go on a long journey, am I not?"

"You don't need extra socks up here, Mr. Arlington. Everything is furnished."

"You've been spying on me."

"I don't have to spy on you."

"Sir, you're not worried about my doublecrossing you — are you?"

There was no answer. The line was dead. But that in itself was answer enough. The archangel was worried. And if he was worried about a doublecross, a doublecross must be within the realm of possibility! Alexander went on packing and chuckling.

He put into the suitcase all he might need in the way of clothes for a few days. He packed his toothbrush and his razor. He went to the wall-safe and took from it the several hundred dollars he always kept there. From his dresser he took his automatic, checked to make certain it was loaded. It was. The automatic, he had decided, was a little extra insurance.

But he did not return downstairs in an hour as he had promised. He wanted to keep his suspects on edge. He knew they would wait. Especially the murderer — he *had* to wait. Alexander spent some time in his easy chair, smoking his pipe and planning the future.

Not until a quarter to 11 did he carry his suitcase downstairs and rejoin his wife and guests. He found them satisfactorily upset. Talbert's face was flushed; he had evidently been at the liquor cabinet. Andrew was sulking in a dark corner, like a surly hog. Ariel and Armbruster sat together on the couch, defiantly close to each other. Old Harry was lurking in the hallway, and Alexander ushered him inside. Then Alexander locked the door from within and sat down behind his desk to face them.

"Has any of you," he began, "noticed anything queer about this day, which will end in exactly one hour and ten minutes?"

They obviously did not understand. For a few moments his only answer was the steady tattoo of the rain against the house and an occasional clap of increasingly loud thunder.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Alexander." That was from his wife. She had risen from the sofa and advanced a step toward him. He surveyed her coldly. She wore an evening gown which began very low on her torso and clung like skin the rest of the way. For Armbruster's benefit, no doubt.

"Sit down, my dear, and don't get excited." Something in his voice made her retreat. "I rather expected you to notice it, even if no one else did. You with your woman's intuition."

"Notice what, Alexander?"

"Haven't you sensed something strange about today? Haven't you had the feeling that all the things you've been doing and saying are somehow familiar? That you did and said those very same things once before?"

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It was clear they all thought he was drunk or playing a joke on them.

"Last night," Alexander continued with a smile, "I was . . . well, perhaps it really wasn't last night. In Eternity one can't be sure about the passage of Time. But I wasn't Up There very long, so I believe it must have been last night. Last night I was murdered."

Ariel stifled a scream.

"Ah, that jogs your memory, my dear?"

"My memory?"

Her ignorance of what he was talking about seemed genuine. Alexander looked around at the other faces, all staring at him without comprehension. So he told them. He told them about Michael, and he told them about why he was back. They listened, and occasionally they looked around at one another.

At the end of the recital, Andrew said, "Uncle Alex, you are completely out of your mind. You should see a doctor!"

"Fenton said you were slipping," Talbert said vindictively. "He didn't know how right he was."

"This is a madhouse!" said Armbruster, rising from the sofa. "I'm getting out of here."

"Sit down, all of you," said Alexander, producing the automatic.

They sat down. Just as the phone rang.

Alexander picked it up, and a voice began immediately, "What are you up to, Arlington?"

"It's an old gimmick, sir," Alexander answered glibly. "Used in lots of mystery novels. In the last chapter the detective herds all the suspects into one room. There he explains his deductions, and the murderer usually confesses or gives himself away. Just some small erasures on your Books."

"Very well, I'll take your word for it, Arlington. But let me remind you that you have only half an hour left."

"That, I suppose," remarked Armbruster when Alexander had hung up, "was probably the archangel."

"Yes," said Alexander.

Armbruster subsided.

"I have been reminded," Alexander went on, "that my time is growing short. Consequently, I will proceed from my story, which none of you seems to believe, to the facts, which are indisputable. In this room there are five of you. All five have good reason to want to see me dead. One of you wants it so much that he — or she — will risk murder.

"There is my dear nephew Andrew, who is up to his ears in debt. Andrew's only hope for enough money to make him solvent lies in my willing it to him, which, unfortunately, I have done. Andrew's needs are immediate, but if I were dead and the will being probated, his creditors would undoubtedly become patient.

"Then there is Talbert, my former secretary. Talbert thinks that if I were out of the picture, he might take over the career of Slade Saunders. My publisher arrives tomorrow, and that will be Talbert's big chance — if I happen to be dead.

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"And there is Harry. Harry is afraid I'll give him away to the police when I've quit writing and have no more use for his inexhaustible past.

"Lastly, there are my dear wife and her dear friend, Mr. Armbruster. Ariel would have left me before this if Mr. Armbruster had any money. If she gets her half of my estate, they can afford to live in the style to which I have accustomed her. So either of them might find it worth the candle to murder me."

"What a morbid mood you're in, Uncle Alex," said Andrew placatingly.

"Morbid but accurate, my dear nephew. Now here is my letter-opener. I am scheduled to go to sleep, sitting at this desk. At precisely 12 midnight the murderer — one of you five — will take this letter-opener and stab me in the back."

Talbert had grown very attentive. Despite himself, he had become fascinated with the problem. "Just supposing, Alexander," the ex-secretary began, "that all you have told us is true. Are you going to go to sleep there at the desk in time for the murderer to commit his crime?"

"Of course not, Talbert. Now that I know I'm going to be murdered it would be pretty difficult, if not impossible, for me to go to sleep, don't you think?"

"Then that ruins the whole idea of the murder happening exactly as it did the first time."

"Precisely, Talbert. You've hit upon the very crux of the problem. It can't happen the same way. There will have to be some differences. But if you will recall, the archangel said he was prepared to make some few small erasures on the records."

All of them were now listening with the greatest interest, caught up by the spirit of the occasion.

"Alexander," Talbert continued, "I don't quite see how you're going to accomplish this feat of detection. Now in our books — rather, your books — the murder was committed, clues were left behind, and only then could the detective begin. But what clues are there in this case to begin on? To cite a crude example — that letter-opener would take fingerprints nicely, but the murderer wouldn't leave his prints until the moment of the murder, and by that time it would be too late for *you* to find them."

"A fascinating phase of the problem, Talbert. I have trained you well, I see. But that's exactly the difficulty which I confess I didn't foresee when I undertook this venture. How am I to solve the crime *before* it is committed?"

"And you've only fifteen minutes left, Uncle Alex," said Andrew with rising excitement.

"Are you expecting somebody to confess even before he pulls the job?" The question came from old Harry.

"It could happen," said Alexander equably, "but I certainly am not counting on it."

"Perhaps you're going to sit there and wait for the murderer to start for you. You'll see who it is and that will

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satisfy your curiosity." This suggestion was Armbruster's.

"Hardly that," Alexander retorted in a spirit of friendly debate. "That, I think, Mr. Armbruster, would take the kind of courage I don't possess — to sit calmly at my desk, watch the murderer over my shoulder, and offer my back to be stabbed."

"Then I can't see how it's going to happen," Ariel said peevishly.

"Of course you don't, my dear, so I will explain. You see, I have a plan. I'll keep my bargain with Michael — because he was so decent about the whole thing — to the extent of being right here at my desk at midnight. *But the murder will not occur!*"

They could not conceal their disappointment. Alexander smiled again.

"After 12 o'clock," he continued, "I shall be free of my obligation to the archangel. The murderer will have missed his date with destiny, and I shall live on — for years and years. But now that my eyes have been opened in respect to all of you, I shall of course not continue to live here. I have my suitcase packed, as you see. I am going away. Then I shall take steps to disinherit you, Ariel, and you, Andrew. As for my career, I have a new book in mind, dealing with this very case. I'm sure such an extraordinary plot will rescue Slade Saunders from the oblivion that threatens him. You'll be on your own, Talbert. As for you, Harry, you yourself have reminded me of my clear duty as a law-abiding citizen."

And Alexander smiled once more.

The five suspects were silent. The clock above the fireplace fixed the time at seven minutes to 12. It was old Harry who spoke first.

"So you're going to keep us all here at the point of a gun, Mr. Arlington. Of course nobody can stab you with that letter-opener if you've got a gun on us. Is that what you call keeping your agreement with the archangel?"

"It is not my intention," replied Alexander serenely, "to hold you at bay with a gun." And to prove his point he returned the automatic to his pocket. "My plan is really much simpler and far less violent."

"Are you going to tell us?" Talbert demanded.

"Why not? Here I am, at the appointed hour and in the appointed place, per agreement. And I have seen to it that all the suspects are here. What can be fairer than that?"

"There's a catch to it," his nephew said.

"Naturally, Andrew. One of you five is the murderer. Now, murderer, you have two choices. At 12 o'clock you can do the deed if you wish, here in the light before four witnesses, excluding myself. In that case you'll surely be apprehended by the police, for I can guarantee that these other scurvy characters will be most anxious to give evidence against you. But you have another choice: you can pass up your chance of murdering me. Since it will be your doing, not mine, that will put me square with Michael, and at one minute past 12 I will walk

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out of this house and out of your lives."

The phone rang violently. Alexander picked up the receiver and said cordially, "Hello, sir."

"Arlington, you're cheating!" said the archangel.

"But I'm not, sir. This is the only way I can find the murderer. There are simply no clues beforehand and I won't be alive after. If the murderer decides not to go through with it, you certainly can't blame me."

"That's very clever, Arlington!"

"Thank you, sir."

"But not clever enough. You forget that the murderer has a date with midnight, just as you have. So the murderer may have a counterplan, too."

Alexander returned the phone to its cradle, no longer smiling. He *had* forgotten that. His shaken confidence did not go unnoticed by his attentive audience.

"What time is it?" asked Andrew, whose vision was imperfect.

"Three minutes to 12." Old Harry was nearest to the clock.

A heavy silence settled over the room. Ariel and Armbruster exchanged brief glances. The rest kept their eyes on Alexander Arlington. There were no unbelievers now. And somewhere among them, the murderer was making a decision.

Quite suddenly, Armbruster rose and walked across the room to the door. He walked with the grace of a cat, and his tread was silent on the carpet. Alexander watched him cautiously, feeling for his automatic. At the door Armbruster stopped and turned swiftly.

"Arlington is right in one thing," he said. "If the murderer kills in full view of the others, they'll be able to give evidence. It would insure their own safety. But suppose the murder could be done without the others witnessing it? Then none of us could be sure which one was the killer. It's true that each of us has a motive and we'd all be suspected — the police might even construe it as a conspiracy and we'd be tried for murder *en masse*. But suppose the police don't learn about this meeting? Then the rest of us are in the clear, the murderer does the job, and takes the same chances of getting away with it that he took before. It all depends on the murderer's being able to kill Arlington without being seen doing it."

It was one minute before 12.

"And how is the murderer going to accomplish that?" Alexander Arlington inquired tartly, although he heard his voice quavering. "How am I to be killed without witnesses in a room full of people?"

Armbruster smiled. The smile of an enemy. "Why, that's simple," he answered. "How could you have overlooked it, Mr. Slade Saunders, famous writer of detective stories? *All I have to do is to turn out the lights!*"

Before Alexander could move, Armbruster's hand found the switch. Darkness came, and darkness remained. The lightning, which had

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been flashing almost continuously, perversely stopped flashing altogether. The rain slashed against the house, loud enough to muffle any footsteps.

The murderer was free to move with perfect anonymity!

If he had not been immobilized by surprise, Alexander might have done something. But he remained frozen in his chair.

There was somebody beside him. A hand pushed his head down upon the desk. Just as if he had fallen asleep. The other hand, Alexander knew, was seeking, finding, grasping the letter-opener.

The blow really didn't hurt very much.

Alexander dimly felt the hand which had pushed his head down exploring the left side-pocket of his jacket, removing his handkerchief . . . The murderer was wiping fingerprints off the knife . . .

There was a ringing in Alexander's head . . .

Or perhaps it was the telephone . . .

"Welcome back, Mr. Arlington! Right on schedule, too."

Alexander collapsed in the golden chair in front of Michael's desk.

"Have a nice time, Mr. Arlington?"

"I was murdered again."

"Of course."

"Who did it?"

The archangel laughed, a laugh that rang and echoed through the high-vaulted marble room. "Why, that's what you went back to Earth to find out. And here you are, Mr. Arlington, asking the same old question. You're not proposing to go through all that a *third* time, are you?"

"No, thanks," said Alexander wearily. "But I still won't be happy here —!"

"Now let's not start that again," the archangel said hastily. "Let's think this problem over for a moment, shall we? Put yourself in the murderer's shoes, Mr. Arlington. When Armbruster turned the lights off, would *you* have gone over to the desk and committed the murder?"

Alexander thought with his head in his hands. "I might have suspected a doublecross. Somebody could have turned the lights back on while I was doing the stabbing, and I'd have been caught red-handed."

"Precisely, Mr. Arlington. Risky business. Now, another little problem. If you were the murderer, what reason could you possibly have for reaching into the *victim's* pocket and using the *victim's* handkerchief to wipe off your fingerprints?"

"I'd do that," answered Alexander, "only if I didn't have a handkerchief of my own."

"Right," nodded the archangel. "And which of your five suspects would be most likely to know that you carried your handkerchief *in the left side-pocket* of your jacket?"

"I see what you mean, sir!" Alexander perked up.

The archangel beamed. "Then maybe you'll be happy here after all, Mr. Arlington."

"Ariel's accomplice was at the light-

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switch," muttered Alexander. "She could trust Armbruster not to turn the lights back on till she was finished with the murder. For confirmation — Ariel couldn't have been carrying a handkerchief, because there was just no place for one in that low-cut dress she was wearing. And my wife, I presume, would be the most likely to know where I'm accustomed to carrying my handkerchief!"

"Exactly the way I had it figured out, Mr. Arlington."

"Say, you're a pretty good detective yourself, sir."

The archangel looked modest. "I've picked up a few tricks here and there," he admitted. "It's the company I've been keeping."

"Company?"

"Didn't I mention that, Mr. Arlington? Dear, dear. If I had, you might never have been dissatisfied in the first place. Well, well, we won't delay any longer. You come in and meet the boys, Mr. Arlington. There's Edgar and Sir Arthur and G.K.C. —"

"Edgar and Sir Arthur and G.K.C!"

"Certainly, Mr. Arlington. Didn't you know that all mystery writers go to Heaven?"

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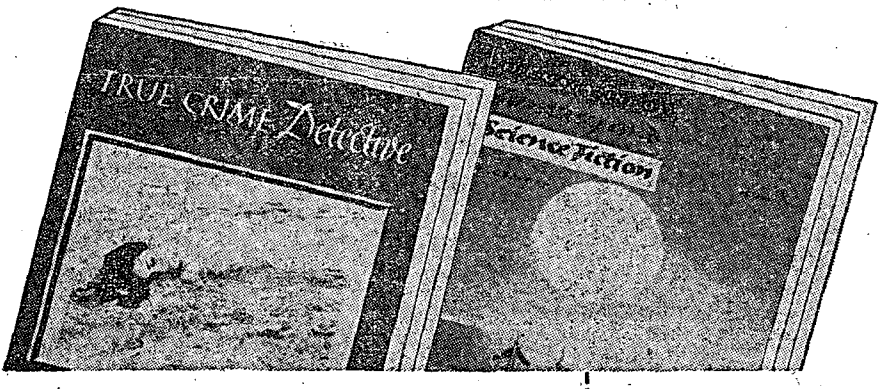

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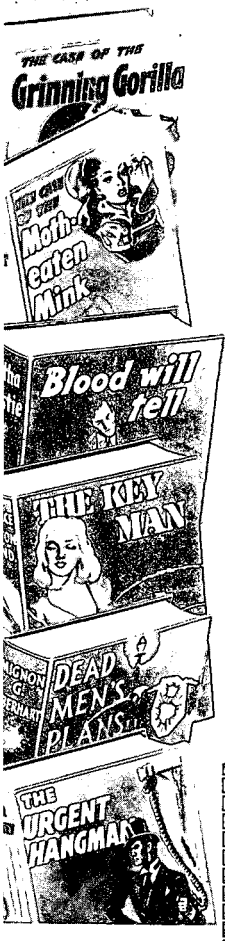

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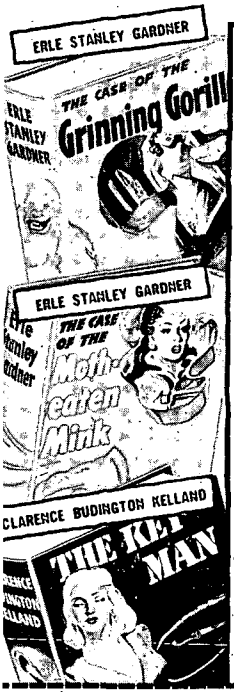
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THE KEY MAN

Pete Mortain listened as the Inspector said: "One clue will lead me to the *killer*—a Stradivarius violin." Pete walked into his room and his blood froze. There was the *Stradivarius!*

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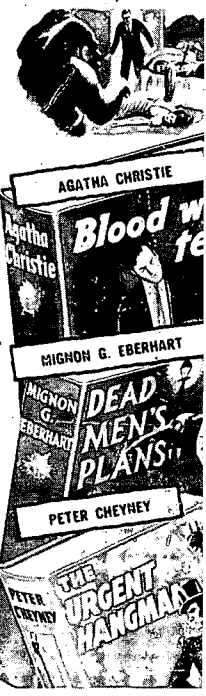
Poirot has to solve a crime for which a man has *already* been sentenced. There isn't a shred of evidence—until he uncovers a newspaper clipping. Now he's sure who the murderer is—*until he finds HER MURDERED!*

5 Mignon Eberhart
DEAD MEN'S PLANS

The police suspect *you* of taking a shot at your step-brother, Reg. You stay near Reg's bed at the hospital. You leave for a few minutes. When you return, you find him — *MURDERED!*

6 Peter Cheyney
THE URGENT HANGMAN

Slim Callaghan was a "dead duck"—unless he found out who would inherit the dead man's fortune. But first, he'd *have to* find the will. And *before* he could do that, he'd have to find the . . . KILLER!



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